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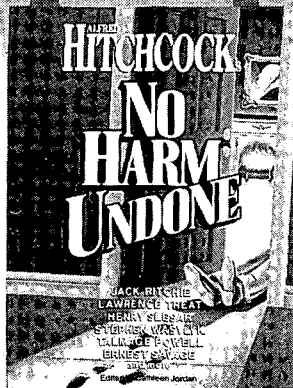


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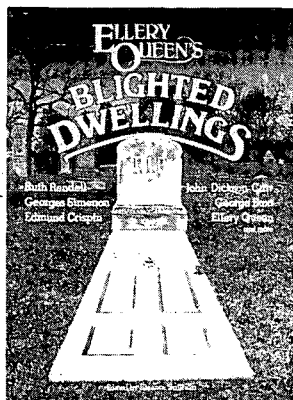
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GUEST EDITORIAL

by

Chris Steinbrunner

*Chris Steinbrunner, as Peter Christian, was the author of a previous movie column in AHMM called *Frames of Reference* (and before that, *Crime on Screen*). This is his second annual report for us on Mystfest.—ED.*

For ten days last summer, the blissful Adriatic sun shone down once more on Mystfest, the only film festival concentrating on current and retrospective motion pictures of mystery and suspense, now in its seventh year at the beautiful resort town of Cattolica on the Italian coast. Few Americans attend, but the area is a target for holiday travelers from nearly all of Europe and England. What better after a day of frolicking on the beach than to visit the festival cinema for thrills and chills—especially the midnight terror lineup? Mystfest was well attended, with an enthusiastic press coverage; it was the festival's most successful year ever.

Walking the curving, friendly streets of Cattolica this past summer, I found it interesting to reflect how previous Myst-

festivals had unspooled motion pictures which took as much as a year or two to have their commercial American releases. *The Naked Face*, a psychiatric Mafia drama set in Chicago starring Roger Moore, and *The Holcroft Covenant*, from the book by Robert Ludlum, both premiered in Cattolica long before in the U.S. Agatha Christie's *Ordeal by Innocence*, a drama full of promise featuring Donald Sutherland and Faye Dunaway, went after a year directly to American cable television and cassette. Cult thrillers like Donald Westlake's *Slayground* and *Repo Man* were seen first at Mystfest, as was the HBO production of *Blackout* with Richard Widmark as the detective tracking a serial killer. Other curious films making their mark first at Mystfest include *Mixed Blood*, Paul Mor-

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rissey's raw drama of murder among street gangs; *Radioactive Dreams*, in which two youngsters named Phillip and Marlowe explore a nuclear-savaged yet still crime-riddled world; H. P. Lovecraft's dread *Re-Animator*; and a four-hour, fascinating documentary on Alfred Hitchcock made mostly in English for Italian television.

A decided high point of the 1986 Mystfest was its retrospective on the screen *noir* adaptations of the doom-laden works of American mystery writer Cornell Woolrich. Though he died nearly twenty years ago, Woolrich is today enjoying great popularity among Europe's mystery-reading public, being one of America's most successful literary exports. Woolrich was the source for such murky B-film classics as *The Guilty* and *Fear in the Night* as well as such successes as RKO's attention-getting *The Window* (about a tenement boy who cries wolf once too often) and Alfred Hitchcock's big-budget *Rear Window* starring James Stewart and Grace Kelly. An astonishing group of extremely obscure Woolrich titles were shown, and heavily attended. Many, like *The Phantom Lady* and *Deadline at Dawn*, were dark tales of the night city. All were grim.

Mystery historian Francis M. Nevins, Jr., was imported to participate in panels on the writer—Nevins has put together biographical pieces and anthologies on Woolrich and is an executor of his estate. A noted Rome psychoanalyst probed Woolrich's decidedly eccentric and not very happy life through his works. Never had the author been so intensely celebrated, surely—but in a sun-drenched setting quite foreign to his tales and lifestyle.

Mystfest's primary function is, however—much like Cannes—to unveil contemporary films, though only in the mystery category. Ten days' worth were shown. Among the judges viewing the films in competition were the famed French crime and mystery director Claude Chabrol and the American creator of the Toby Peters mysteries, Stuart Kaminsky. Chabrol himself contributed his newest suspense drama to the festival, *Inspector Lavardin*, about a policeman's investigation of a bizarre marriage after the husband has been found dead on a beach.

Many nationalities contributed their best for the competition, and it's a pity that because of language barriers and distribution problems the winners may get little or no circulation in the United States.

The prize-winning film was from France, *The Fourth Power*, in which a woman newscaster comes across a cassette revealing that the prime minister is involved in a political assassination. Denholm Elliot was named best actor for a supporting role in a British film, *Defense of the Realm*, another newspaper drama in which a boy's death in a hit-and-run accident may trigger an international incident; this film won the special jury's award. Best actress was Angela Molina in the Spanish film *Lola*, in which

a young mother is threatened by a long-ago love affair. The best script prize went to the Polish feature, *Medium*, in which a small-town parapsychologist discovers a trance link to a long-ago murder.

The upcoming Mystfest will celebrate the one hundredth anniversary of the meeting between Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson with a retrospective of rare Sherlockian films, plus—as usual—the best mystery films from all over the world. Under the warm Adriatic sun, what evil could be finer?

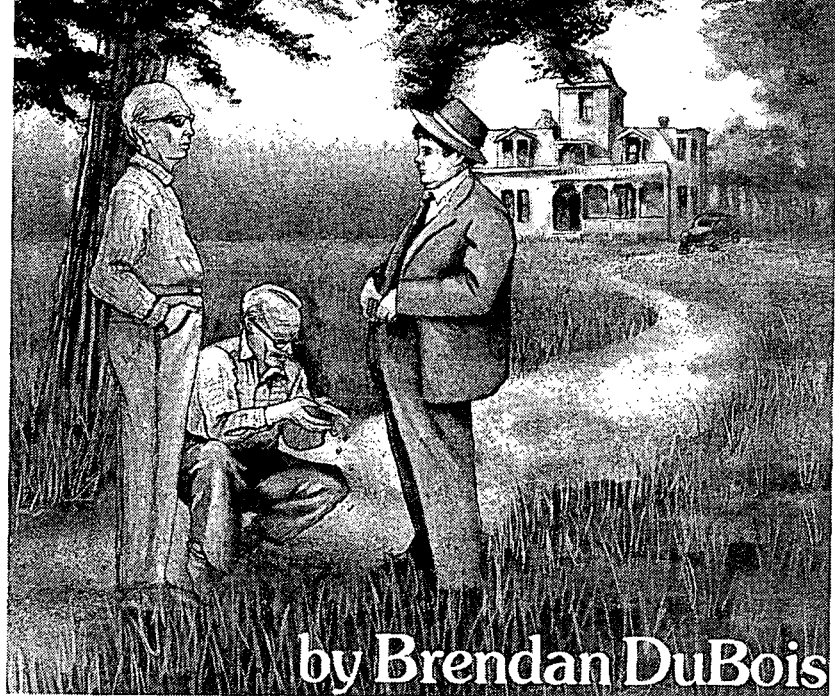
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FICTION

What Friends Do



by Brendan DuBois

On one afternoon in August a Japanese sports car with Massachusetts license plates roared into the gravel lot of the Avery General Store and I said to Frank Mooney, "I'll bet you a roll of wintergreens that fella's lookin' for the Baylor treasure."

Frank grinned at me and pushed up his wireless glasses with his thumb and then wiped his hands on his apron, nervous like. Frank's about my age, two

years closing in to seventy, and we've been friends ever since we both had Mrs. Boulger for second grade at Avery Elementary.

"What makes you think that, Larry?" he asked. He came out from behind the long wooden counter of the store. Like me he was wearing baggy green chinos and a checked flannel shirt, but he also had on his white storekeeper's apron and about twelve or twenty pens stuck in

his shirt front. Frank lives in a small apartment over the store, which has been on the King's Highway since at least 1850. Outside it's got two Texaco pumps and inside you can buy most anything from a lottery ticket to a six-pack of beer and there's a small counter with swivel stools. The floors are wide wooden planks and if need be Frank can always switch on the grill for a quick lunch.

"The hungry look on his face, I guess," and Frank and I laughed at that. I was sitting on one of those stools, my elbows on the counter, looking out the open front door, past the newspaper racks which have copies of the *Union Leader* or the *Avery Transcript*. The red sports car was parked near the pumps, and I could see the fella inside lookin' at a map.

"'Nother lost soul," Frank said.

"Sure is."

Outside it was sunny and I could see the low range of mountains that marked the outskirts of the White Mountains. Best I could reckon, Frank wasn't having much of a good summer. Gas prices were high again and there weren't many tourists stoppin' by on their way to Lake Montcalm, and most of the locals did their shopping up near Boston Falls, where there's one of those big

plazas where you can see a movie, buy a pizza, and do a week's worth of groceries without even stepping outside. Whenever Tommy Lane, the local postman, came by, I always saw Frank's face tighten up when the boy dropped off a load of bills.

The car door opened up and the fella stepped out. He was a young pup of about thirty or so, wearing gray slacks, a red polo shirt, and a blue jacket. He was tanned and his black hair was thick and wavy, like it was almost a wig. He had a map and a notebook in his hands.

"Tell you what," I whispered to Frank. "We show 'im where the Baylor treasure is and we keep half. How does that sound?"

Frank smiled at that, but it was a weak smile. I saw him look over at his cash register. Taped to it was a cut-out picture from some travel magazine, showing a beach and some pink and blue houses on Bermuda. That was Frank's dream, like he'd told me so many times, to make a go of it at the store and then sell out and live in Bermuda, "where I can read the papers every day and laugh when you Yankee bastards get a foot of snow in March." But with the slow traffic and all those bills and each year slipping away before you knew it, well, I didn't know if he'd ever

get there, and I knew he was scared he wouldn't, either.

The young man stepped up on the wooden porch, past the rakes, hoes, and sacks of fertilizer, and came in, his shoes clomping loudly on the floor.

"Afternoon, gentlemen," he said.

"Howdy," Frank said. I nodded.

He licked his lips, like he was a cat or somethin', and then he had an embarrassed smile on his face.

"I know this sounds crazy," he said, "but I'm looking for a piece of land near here, a piece that was owned by—"

"Brian Baylor," Frank and I said together, interrupting him. The boy's face turned red and I added to Frank, "You owe me a roll of wintergreens."

Frank grinned and said, "Every month or so we get somebody like you, looking to see where Brian Baylor lived, and we haven't had anybody stop by in a few weeks, so we was due and you showed up. A good guess on our parts."

"Oh." The man nodded at that and said in a small voice, "So you know where the Baylor estate is?"

Oh, Frank and I laughed at that one, looking at each other with wide grins, remembering old stories and old things, remembering the days and nights

we had spent up there at the house, and the wide lawns with the grand view of the White Mountains.

"Oh, hell, yes," I said. "Frank and I grew up here, and there's many a time when we knew people who looked for the Baylor treasure. But nobody up here's ever found it, and I don't think anybody will, 'cause it ain't there, and if it is, it's too well hidden."

"Listen, friend," Frank said, easing over to the cash register, "if you're looking to make some easy cash quick, with no fuss, then I'll sell you a state lottery ticket. You got better chances with that than to look for the Baylor treasure. About a couple of hundred people been up here before you and I guess another couple of hundred will be up there in the next ten or so years."

The fella smiled back at us with that and said, "No, I'm not looking for the treasure." He reached in his coat pocket and took out a business card. "My name's Brad Carr, I'm with the *Boston Globe*. I'm doing a story for the Sunday paper about the Baylor treasure, and I've been wandering around here all morning, looking for the access road."

I nodded. "Not many people go up there now. It's pretty grown over and such, and of

course the cops try to keep an eye on it, to keep kids from burning it down. Last we heard, the property's still with the estate, and it's in the courts and the sisters are still feudin'."

Brad said, "That's right, it still is. Listen, could one of you give directions to the Baylor place for me?"

Frank looked at me and I looked at him and he grinned some and said, "We could, but we won't."

Brad got all tense and such, like he was a rabbit and heard a dog howling. "Why? Trying to keep it a secret?"

I giggled and Frank said, "No, son, it's just that your fancy car won't make it up there. You'll lose your transmission on some rocks 'fore you get twenty feet off the town road. That access road's all washed out and rough."

Frank undid his apron and put it on the wooden counter, next to the soup display and the beef sticks. "What do you think, Larry? A slow day?"

"Pretty slow. Maybe you should take a break."

"Maybe I will. Feel up to a ride?"

"Sure do."

Frank turned to the reporter. "Tell you what, son, me and my friend Larry here will run you up to the Baylor place. We got the time and we'll take my

truck and get up there with no trouble at all. How does that sound?"

Brad looked tickled pink and put his notebook away in his coat pocket. "That'd be great. Let me get my camera gear and I'll be with you in a sec."

He went outside and Frank and I followed. Frank hung up a sign on the door that said BE BACK SOON (which he usually uses when he's out fishin') and he was setting to lock the door when I said, "Hold on, I forgot somethin'."

I went inside for just a moment and came out, the roll of wintergreens safe in my hand. I popped one up and crunched it in my mouth.

"Bet's a bet," I said, and we went out to the gravel lot.

Frank's truck was a year old Bronco, one of those big black things with large tires, four-wheel drive, and fancy-pants stereo system. I got an old Chevy pickup which is rusted out and runs rough, but at least it's paid for. Frank bought his Bronco last summer, when gas was cheap and when the tourists were lined up to use his gas pumps, but now the monthly payments must be killing him, though he didn't make much mention of it.

The reporter was in the rear

seat with his cameras and I was up front with Frank as we went north on King's Highway. The reporter stuck his head over the seat like a dog that wants to know where he's going, and Frank and I filled him in the best we could about Brian Baylor, which wasn't hard. Everybody up here knew the story of Brian Baylor.

"Brian came up from someplace down south," I said. "Maybe New York City, maybe New Jersey, nobody's too sure. He lived up here in the 1920's, back during Prohibition, and he had a bunch of locals workin' for him, smuggling in booze from across the Canadian border. They'd go up in the woods through Maine and the like, and up there's so many trails, logging roads, and paths that nobody from the government could keep a track of 'em. So that's how he made his fortune. Sometime around then he met, what was her name, Frank?"

"Doris Curtiss."

"That's right, Doris Curtiss. My daddy knew her and said she was all curves and had a smile that could melt icicles in February. So they was married after a bit but Doris was close to her family and didn't want to move, so's Brian Baylor bought a couple of hundred acres of the best land and built a house for her."

Frank nodded and turned the Bronco down Mast Road, a narrow blacktop lane with lots of potholes and bumps. The trees were thick and grew right up to the road, and there was only an occasional house or rusted mobile home. Frank picked up the story.

"I saw some pictures once of the house, when it was still being lived in," he said. "All painted and beautiful, with a wide white porch that went all around the whole house, and long, green lawns, kept perfectly mowed. You gotta remember, Brad, that 'bout this time the Depression was starting, and a lot of people couldn't believe the money that Brian Baylor put into his house. But nobody complained too much. Brian was a tough old bird, and nobody crossed him, not ever."

"Really?" Brad asked, scribbling away in his notebook.

"Well," I said, turning in my seat to face him. "There's a story that gets kicked around some, more like a rumor than a story, 'bout a police chief we had back when Brian Baylor was around. Chief . . . Perkins?"

"Parsons," Frank said.

"Parsons," I agreed. "Old Chief Parsons. Real religious coot, didn't like anybody gambling, smoking, or drinkin', of course. So he got his dander up and one night he said to some towns-

people, my daddy one of them, that he was gonna go up to the Baylor house and clean things up, show them the force of law, that sort of thing. So he drove up there and that was that."

"What was what?" Brad asked.

I shrugged. "Never seen again. Him or his car. Just went up there . . . and never came back."

The Bronco clattered over a wooden bridge and Frank said, "Almost there. Shout it out when you see five-tenths on the odometer."

I kept look on the odometer and when I counted off five-tenths I said, "You got it, Frank," and he pulled the Bronco off to the side. There was a narrow dirt road, almost like a path, to our left and it was overgrown with weeds and small bushes.

"There it be, all right," I said.

"Doesn't look like many people get up there," the reporter observed.

"Oh, they do," Frank said. "They do. Better hold on, gentlemen, I'm gonna slip her into four-wheel or we won't make it."

The dirt road rose up and was rough all right, with only an occasional smooth patch of gravel where the old driveway had once been. Branches and saplings whipped at the windows as Frank kept the Bronco

going, and the ride was so bouncy a couple of times my head struck the roof. About halfway up there was a couple of NO TRESPASSING—POLICE TAKE NOTICE signs, but they were all rusted and shot out. Then the road smoothed out and made a curve and we came out onto a grassy meadow, and there was the Baylor house, sitting on top of an exposed hill, like a castle or an old fort, dominating everything around it.

"There you go," I said, and I got out.

Frank stepped out and said to Brad, "Now, watch your—" but it was too late, as Brad got out and started walking and fell flat on his face after five feet. He got up, his face red, green grass stains on his pants and jacket.

"What the hell was that?"

"Holes," I said. "Whole lawn looks like a herd of woodchucks lived out here. Old Brian Baylor's been dead for forty years and you got forty years' worth of holes and pits around here, from people lookin' for his treasure."

We walked slowly up the hill, all of us—especially Brad—looking for the holes and half-buried pits that were scattered across the lawn. The grass was knee-high and you had to watch careful for the holes, like you were walking on some old bat-

tlefield. The house was just as I remembered it: three stories tall, wide, with the porch surrounding it like a belt on a fat lady. There was a barn and a garage off to the right where the dirt driveway curved around some and met it. From a distance the house looked majestic, but as I got closer I saw the toll of the years and the vandals and the treasure-hunters. There wasn't a single window left intact, and parts of the walls had been chopped open. Some wooden pillars on the porch had been knocked off and as we reached the porch there was the sweet-sour smell of wet trash and garbage. Off to the west was a beautiful view of the mountains, all deep blue and green, and the faint shimmer of the sun reflecting off Lake Montcalm.

"Wonderful view," Brad said, and he started wandering around, taking pictures. I went to the open door and peered in. Once there had been some fine, expensive furniture in here, I remember my daddy saying, but all I saw was a tumbled pile of scrap wood and cloth, heaped in one corner. Wallpaper had fallen off the walls in long, weeping strips, and there were holes and gaps in the plaster where people had attacked the walls with sledgehammers. Brad stepped up to the porch with us.

"What happened then?" he said, the notebook in his hand. "How did it get like this?"

Frank stuck his hands in his pockets and started staring out over the field, like he was remembering how it had once been, the fine grass lawn, the friends and guests of Brian Baylor driving up here in their old automobiles, long and graceful. Brian Baylor had been dead for a long time, but it was like he had never left Avery, New Hampshire.

"When Prohibition ended, Brian tried to go into the booze business, legal as he could, but it didn't work out," Frank said. "The word was that Brian could only make a buck when it was an illegal one. Then there were some pressures between his wife Doris and himself, and a couple of times Doris would be seen downtown with bruises on her arms and face. Then just before the war started she left Brian and went out of town with some Canadian, and last we heard she was up in Montreal, and no one would go near Brian for weeks, he was so angry. He never really got over that and during the war his only brother Russ got himself killed someplace in North Africa, and we started hearing stories that Brian was losing it, that he was talking to the trees and the walls, and one thing led to an-

other and he got sickly, and in 1946 he was in the state hospital down in Concord. And when he died there was a priest and a couple of doctors and a nurse there with him."

Brad ambled around the porch, touching the worn and splintered wood like he was expecting it to tell him something, and he said, "I read in the files that Brian Baylor supposedly made a deathbed confession, or something like that."

"Ayuh," I said, folding my arms and then batting away a fly. "Wasn't much of a confession. More like a rampage. He said that everybody, from his brother to his sisters to Doris even, had plotted against him and tried to kill him, but by God he'd have the last laugh. All of his money was changed into gold pieces, on the sly of course, I imagine, and he hid it all up on his land in Avery. Close to a million, maybe, in gold pieces and the such, and then one of the doctors—this is the story, at least—leaned over and said, well, Brian, you're about to meet your Maker, can you tell us where it's hidden? And Brian sighed and crooked his finger, and the doc leaned over and Brian smiled up at him and said, 'You all so friggin' smart. You figure it out.' And he died later that night."

Frank sat down on the porch, his legs hanging over the edge, his heels sliding back and forth in the grass. Somewhere over near the lake I heard the buzz of an airplane.

"So that's the story he told," Frank said, "and he told four people, countin' everybody in that room, and by the next day eight people knew, and by the end of the week this place was overrun with people with shovels, spades, and maps and the like, and they tore this place open, and it hasn't stopped since. After the first few months the digging slowed down, till Brian's will was made public and there was no mention of any money at all, just a couple of hundred here and there, and the digging started right up again."

Frank looked over his shoulder, readjusted his glasses. "A damn shame, too, 'cause this was a beautiful house, and it was all tore apart. Brian had two younger sisters and they started squabbling about the will back in '47 and they're both in rest homes in New York, but they're still squabbling and this land's still tied up."

"And the treasure hunters keep coming?" Brad asked.

"Oh, they keep coming," I said. "And they've found zilch, which should tell you something, that nothing's here, but that just gets some people going."

Don't matter that hundreds of people have gone over every inch of this house here, they keep on coming."

Well, with that we wandered around the outside of the house some, Frank and I pointing out some things and Brad taking pictures left and right, though we turned him down polite like when he asked to take ours. He wanted to go into the house and Frank tried to tell him not to, and he didn't listen to Frank but he listened real quick when the floor started creaking and giving way underneath him. Out in the barn there was a pile of moldering hay and straw and you could see the burrows the field mice made and a couple of times I nodded at Frank and he winked back and I felt good. Old Frank and I have a lot of memories about this place, and I was getting a kick out of playing tourist guide to this out-of-stater.

At the garage Brad poked around inside, looking at the rusty tools and the old oil stains on the concrete floor, and parked right outside the front of the garage was an old Ford, a 1938 model, it looked like. It was all rusted out and the naked hubs of the wheels were set up on concrete blocks, and of course most of the glass had been broken out. The fabric had been eaten away and I stood by the

windshield and on the driver's side there was a chunk of glass there and a faded sticker that said "A."

"Car's been here a while," Brad said, taking a picture of it.

"That's for sure," I said, fingering the piece of glass. "See this? Old gas ration sticker. Brian must've put this car up on blocks when gas started getting rationed. Lot of people did it around here."

We walked through the tall grass and made our way back to the porch, and I looked again at the view. I wondered what it must've been like, to live up here like a king of the hill, seeing that view every day. I shook my head. I was living in a third floor walkup in downtown Avery, with me and a hot-plate to keep me company, and I felt a sudden feeling of remorse, that so many years of mine had gone by and I had so little to show for them. I looked over at Frank and it seemed he had the same feeling. All that money, all that gold . . .

All three of us were sitting on the porch, swinging our legs, and Brad flipped through his notebook and said, "You two have been up here all your lives, right?"

I nodded and so did Frank. He was right next to me.

"So you must have searched

around some, too, didn't you?"

Well, Frank looked at me and I looked at him and then I took a deep breath and said, "Brad, we had some fun showing you around up here and I know you've been writing a lot in your notebook there, but I was wondering if I could answer your question and if it could be between just us three."

Brad looked puzzled at that and he shut his notebook and I looked over the waving grass, the wind blowing hard from the lake.

"Frank and I have been friends all these years, and one summer, back in '51, we decided we was goin' to find the Baylor treasure, and we spent a whole fall up here, after the tourists had left. We camped out in a tent on the lawn—the house was too spooky to sleep in, you understand—and we dug and we argued and we searched and we lived on old bacon and beans and cold cans of soup, and we stayed here until the snow started coming. And one day I was in the house, and we were broke by that time, and I started rummaging around, looking for old canned food, and I caught myself in a mirror in the hallway. My hair was long and greasy and I had an awful beard, and my clothes were covered with dirt and patches. I looked at myself for

a long time and then I brought Frank in to the mirror and he did the same thing, and that afternoon we packed up our tents and left here and we never hunted the treasure any more. There are some things you can't look for, Brad, they'll drive you crazy."

Frank was looking at the ground, a faraway look on his face, and I knew he was thinking, boy, if we had found the treasure back then, I wouldn't be where I was, and I felt bad and I gave him a quick squeeze with my arm and he smiled up at me.

"Of course," I continued, "Frank and I had an agreement. We agreed that no matter what happened, what went on, that if we found the treasure we'd split it, fifty-fifty, and that we'd always split it down the middle, whatever happened."

Frank sat up some. "Even now," he said. "Why, three years ago I won four hundred dollars in the state lottery and I gave half of it to Larry here, and he did the same when he got some money when his Great-uncle George died. Fifty-fifty. Why, even when I had my heart attack last year he took care of my store for me."

"Can I ask you one more thing?" Brad asked, the wind picking up his black hair some.

"Sure," Frank said.

"Where do you think the treasure might be?"

Frank looked away again and I said, "Well, I got two answers for that. First, you gotta remember that Brian Baylor wasn't quite all there when he was dyin', so there's a good chance that there isn't any treasure."

"But I don't think you believe that," Brad said.

"All right then, maybe you're right. Maybe there is a treasure. But who says it has to be here?" I moved my arm around, like I was waving at something far away. "The Baylor estate covers almost a couple of hundred acres. The gold could be anywhere out there, buried under a rock, near a tree or a stream. Forty years have gone by, forty years of snow and storms and animals pokin' around, and who knows what might be covering it. If it's hid, it won't be found easy."

"Will you look again?"

The wind picked up some and I saw some clouds massing over the mountains, gray and white shapes that were moving to us. Rain, maybe.

Frank stood up. "Well, I won't, unless God comes to me in a dream and tells me. It gets strange up here, Brad, 'specially at night. Some odd people come up here, lookin' for the gold, and sometimes they ain't

all right. Sometimes you hear gunshots. A lot of times this ain't a safe place, not safe at all."

With that Brad took some more pictures and we walked back to the Bronco, all of us keeping our heads down as we looked out for holes, or for whatever else might be hidden there.

Later that night Frank and I were on the porch of his store, sipping cold Buds from the bottles, watching the storm clouds race by us. It was dark and overcast but there was no rain. The beer tasted wonderful, but Frank grimaced a couple of times.

"You all right?" I asked.

He rubbed at his chest. "Something's acting up. I might see my doc tomorrow."

"You should, at that," I said. "Some reporter, huh? Expects to drive up here and maybe drive away with the treasure in his pocket."

"What?" Frank said.

"I said, that reporter was doing his story, but you could tell by his face that he wished he could drive away with the treasure."

"Oh," he said, and he picked up his beer bottle, looking over towards the mountains. He sipped at it and then he put it down.

"Got some letters from the bank today," he said.

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh," Frank said, his arms on his knees. "You work hard all your life, you try to make a store like this run, and it all ends up that you're two months behind in your car payments and two months behind in your mortgage payments, and then the banks ain't your best buddies any more."

"C'mon, Frank, I got some money I could—"

He waved a hand at me. "Forget it. It wouldn't be enough." He picked up his beer bottle and stared into it. "Hardly anything could be enough."

Well, I tried to cheer him up some and it wasn't working, so I finished my beer and went home, up to the third floor and the hotplate and the tiny refrigerator and canned goods, and the ants had gotten back into the sugar bowl again. I stood by the window for a long time, looking out at the lights of Avery, and I felt scared and I remembered the look on Frank's face, a strange one, and I wish now I had asked him what was going on.

Oh, God, how I wish.

A couple of days passed, days where I worked on my garden some and took my truck over to

Montcalm to get a new front tire. On the third day after the reporter had come, I got up and made me a quick breakfast, a scrambled egg and a few pieces of bacon, and then I got in my truck and drove down to Frank's store.

Which was closed.

I checked my watch. It was just a bit past nine, and Frank was late. His truck wasn't in the lot out back so I figured he was gettin' some supplies or something, so I hunched up in my truck and parked it underneath an oak tree—for the shade—and I started reading the *Union Leader*, which I had lifted off from a bundle left on the porch.

Well, the minutes dragged by and every now and then a car would pull up and leave after seeing the CLOSED sign out front, and when I finished reading and re-reading the classifieds and saw that it was now past ten, I knew somethin' was up. I got out of my truck and made a couple of phone calls from the phone booth outside, but no one had seen Frank at all that morning. I got back inside my truck and I thought, well, maybe he went down to Maine to visit his sister.

But he would've told me. Frank always told me what he was doing, where he was going, except for now, and with a sick

feeling in my heart I had a good idea where he was and I started my truck up and got out of the lot, retracin' the same route I went out on before.

After going up the driveway I got out on the grass lawn and there was Frank's Bronco, parked up near the garage and the Baylor house and the rusted car on blocks, and I switched off the engine and walked slowly up the grass, keeping an eye for the holes and ditches. I didn't see Frank standing around or doing anything, but his truck was there and I knew how he loved that truck so he had to be close by, and sure enough, I was right.

Frank was by the old rusted Ford, flat on his back, his arms splayed out and his eyes closed, and I stopped and took some deep breaths, and I kneeled down and touched his cold skin and all I said was, "Frank, what the hell were you doin' here?"

The next few minutes were kinda blurry. From inside the garage I got an old wool blanket and I covered him with it, all the while my hands and legs were trembling and my face was wet with tears. They say the older you get the more you get used to death, but that's a load of crock. I covered him up the best I could and I moved his arms in some, folding them over his chest where his heart

must've let out, and I saw that his hands were orange. I took another deep breath and touched them some, and I saw that they were covered with rust stains, and I looked up at the car. He must've been pushing or leaning against the car when his heart stopped, and I stood up, looking and thinking and just standin' there for a while.

I went over and opened the old trunk. It squeaked up easily enough and it was empty, 'cept for some field mice nests in a corner. But Frank had seen something, something that had made him come up here early in the morning and leave the store closed. I remembered how he had jumped on what I had said about the reporter driving away with the treasure in his pocket. I looked at the car and the garage, and then a strange tingling started—deep in my chest—and for a few minutes I seemed to forget all about poor Frank, lying there dead. I started grinning and I reached under his shoulders and I moved him out of the way, and then I got into his Bronco and started it right up, since he'd left the keys in the ignition. I moved the Bronco around some and backed it up to the rear of the car, and then I hooked up Frank's tow chain, which he always kept in the rear of the truck. The Bronco was in four-

wheel drive and it just took a noisy few seconds to drag the car off its blocks and a few yards down the hillside. I parked the Bronco and went back to the garage. I grabbed a hold of a rusted shovel that was in one corner and I came back outside and I started digging, and suddenly it all made sense.

For there it had been, all those years, a car on blocks, settin' in front of an empty garage. And if Brian Baylor was going to set his car up on blocks, why wouldn't he have kept it in the garage, under wraps? Why leave it outside, exposed to the sun, snow, and rain? Why leave it outside so it's blockin' the driveway?

I dug at one of the four depressions in the ground where the blocks had stood all those years, and after two feet my shovel scraped against something. I bent over, not minding the creaking and groaning in my back, and I brushed away the dirt, and there was a small metal box there. I tried to lift it up, but it was too heavy. My arms and hands were shaking some and I thought, Christ, it's so damn heavy, how am I going to lift it up? And then I ran back to the Bronco and backed it up, and with the chain in place I dragged the box out. It was one of those metal strongboxes and it weighed a goddam ton, it felt

like, and I got some more tools from out of the garage and popped open the rusty lid and there it was, just like all the stories, the dull looking coins which I let dribble through my dirty fingers, over and over again. Oh, my heart was thumpin' so hard I thought I was going to join poor old Frank, but I swore at myself and got back to work and after a while I had four holes dug and four strongboxes in a pile. Then I drove my pickup up to the house and loaded the boxes in the cab, sweating and swearing.

When I was done there I rested for a while and I looked at the blanket-covered form of my best friend Frank, and I thought of calling the police, and I thought of Brian Baylor's two spinster sisters, squabbling and such, and how they'd have first claim on the money. And something else came to me and then I went back to work some, and then I drove home, leaving Frank up at the empty house, dead and alone.

About a week ago the bank finally took hold of Frank's store, since his sister and his other cousins didn't want to assume the mortgage and such, but before they cleaned it out I sneaked in and took away his picture of Bermuda. A fine place, it looks

like, a place I might just go to.

When Frank was noticed missing, a search started up after a day or so and then the cops found him up at the Baylor estate, after they got an anonymous phone call that his truck was up there. The cops took a look around at the car, at the empty holes, and the shovel in Frank's hand, and the story got to the papers that Frank had been diggin' for the treasure and had died from a heart attack. Of course nothing had been found, but when that story got to the *Union Leader* and when that fella Brad did his story for the *Boston Globe*, well, dozens of people were up at the Baylor place, digging and fighting with each other until the cops had to go up and close them down.

Now I hear that the selectmen might declare the Baylor place a public health hazard and might tear it down, which is all right by me, 'cause I got the four boxes under my bed.

Sometimes, at night before I go to sleep, I drag them out and stare at the coins, thinking about the times Frank and I searched for the treasure, thinking about the time I found it, and remembering how I snuck away from the Baylor place, after tidying up the holes some

and cleaning my fingerprints off Frank's truck, and puttin' the shovel in his dead hands.

And I think: why didn't Frank tell me he was going up to the Baylor estate in the first place? Why didn't he want me to help? Was he planning to take the treasure for himself?

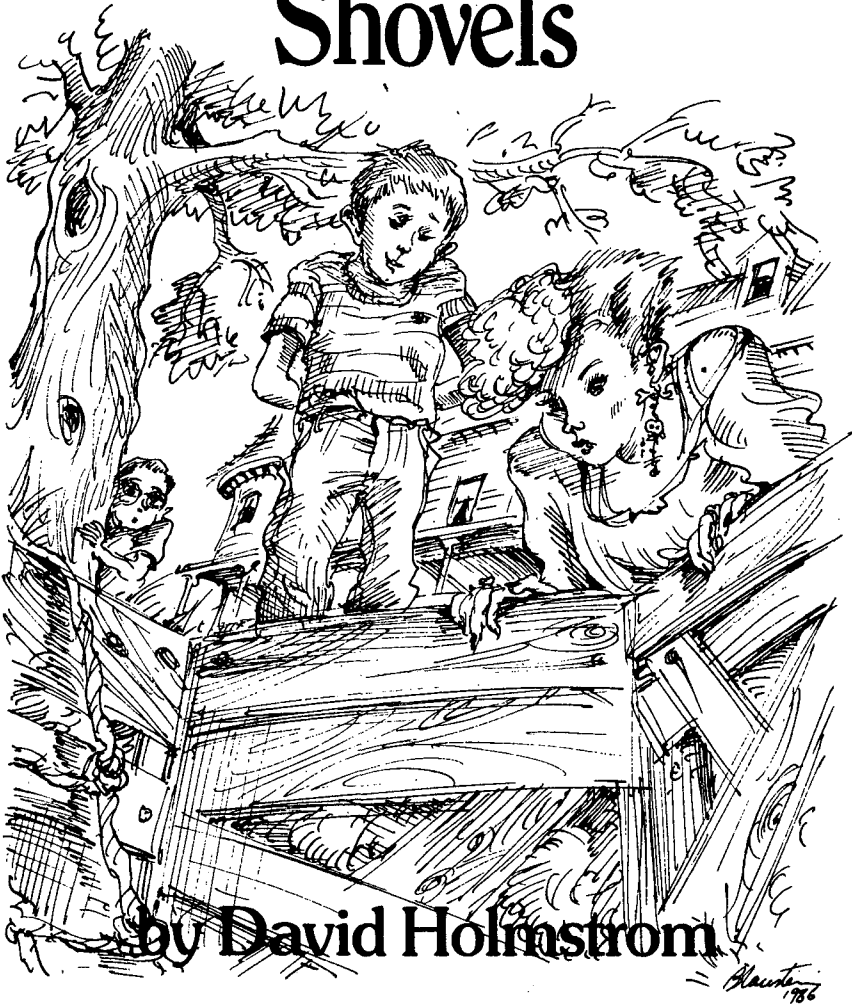
I like to think that he would've found it and would've split it with me like we agreed so many years ago, that he was just going up there on a whim, on an idea, and that he would've been embarrassed if I was there and all he came up with was four empty holes. I like to believe that, that he would've shared it with me, if he had kept digging.

But I remember the strange feeling I got, when I was diggin' and when I knew, knew for a fact, that the treasure was there, and it hadn't mattered that Frank was dead only a few feet away. All that had mattered right then and there was the shovel in my hand and the ground at my feet. I remember that and a voice inside me says, Larry, ol' boy, agreement or no agreement, you know Frank was going to run off without leaving you a dime, like friends sometimes do.

And I don't like to think like that about my best friend, but the thoughts come just the same.

FICTION

Our Little Red Shovels



by David Holmstrom

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Edith Joan was not a sister who drew much currency out of the bank of her affections. Mean eyed and superior, she used to stand over me with her arms crossed in the back yard and say quietly, "You look like a squirrel, a weasel, or both."

I was seven years younger than Edith Joan, a mere eight-year-old, necessarily independent because of the recent death of my mother. I was learning quickly that to be loved was a benefit bestowed on me only by a few adults. And a partially blind kid named Buzzy.

Edith Joan and I lived in a big white house with a comforting green lawn as plush as Christmas. The trees too were bushy and green. A wide stream ran by the back part of our lot. "I do not look like a weasel," I said to Edith Joan, hurt but defiant. "Good," she would say, her chin up, "don't let anybody malign you, not even me."

When she came home from school in the afternoons I was usually in the back yard digging holes or playing circus. I imagined a big circus ring with elephants, tigers, horses with plumes, and brown bears all circling on bright red and blue cloth at my command. My whip was a stick with a cord tied to it, and I cracked it expertly.

If Buzzy were there, seated behind glasses as thick as two full moons, I would describe each animal to him between cracks, my voice building until I imagined breathless adoration from a surrounding crowd. Each person paid eight fifty to get in, thereby making me rich and famous.

The beautiful bareback rider—the sweet and lithesome Gorgeous MaComber—was my dead mother, the bejeweled star of the biggest show on earth. "Hi, Mom," I whispered in between cracks. "Do you remember me?"

If it was circus I was playing when Edith Joan came home from high school, I stopped playing. Prearranged signals from me to Buzzy would end the show. Edith Joan was not one for make believe or pictures of giants done with crayons. "Freaks," yelled Edith Joan, standing on the back porch holding the door open with a diet drink in her hand. She looked at us across the lawn and under the trees and said, "You two are freaks." I was too far away to see if her lip curled.

If I was digging holes when she arrived, I would keep on digging. This momentarily inflamed her. "Are you digging to bury or digging to uncover?" she yelled and shook her head. "You are one stupid kid," she said. Why did she dislike me so? What had I done

to be regarded so terribly? It was impossible to like her at age fifteen. She would be intolerable at twenty.

The digging became an area of concern for my father. At the dinner table he would look at me with squinted teddy bear eyes and say, "Tommy, honey, is this digging for a real reason or just to fill and unfill a boy's time?"

I had a reason then. I was lonely for a purpose of my own and somehow it was satisfying to take that little red shovel, feel my foot push it in the earth, bend and lift and dump the loamy earth in a pile. And then do it again and again. I was no longer neutral. Digging was power, all of my little body doing something with a friendly shovel that said, "Let's chew the earth together, Tommy."

"I'm just digging," I said, lightly to my father. "I like it just the way Edith Joan likes to smoke." She was too clever to react.

"Edith Joan," said Daddy angrily, scraping up the last of the mashed potatoes, "I know you are not smoking cigarettes or any other substance and that is the way it should be and will be."

"He's lying," she said at me, collecting the dishes as Mildred came in the room.

"Nobody smoking nothing around here," Mildred said, bringing in three plates of apple pie. "I got a nose that still smells anything two days later. Cigarettes, anything that can be lit I got holy permission not to miss it."

But I knew Edith Joan smoked. At night she sat in her bathroom naked with the fan on and smoked cigarettes and marijuana and tossed the butts down the toilet. She also looked at pictures of men with no clothes on. And she looked at herself in the mirror for hours.

Mildred put apple pie in front of me and grazed my head with her hand. This gnarly, loose-jointed woman who lived in a big room off the kitchen with a porch filled with flowers loved me. Mean as Edith Joan was, Mildred loved Edith Joan, too. I learned later that my father paid Mildred double what she would have received at any other house in Evanston.

When Buzzy asked his parents for a shovel for his birthday, my father got a phone call, then a visit from Buzzy's father. "Show us what you do," said my father as he and I and Buzzy and Buzzy's father stood by my digging ground. I took my little red shovel and I dug. I dug about four shovels full, annoyed that with adults watching I had no power over the earth. I could feel power being sucked out of me into them. So I stopped digging.

"I don't see anything wrong with this," said Buzzy's father, standing there in his pinstriped banker's suit. "The Buzzer could use a little shoulder and back exercise," he said, smiling, his pink hand resting on Buzzy's shoulder. Buzzy was no weakling. He couldn't do sports because he couldn't follow balls with his eyes. He was no weakling. On his birthday Buzzy got a little red shovel with a white ribbon around it.

Edith Joan mocked us. She called us crazy. "Why don't you guys play with trucks or baseballs like real boys?" she said to us one day after coming home from school. "You guys are crazy."

Mildred encouraged us. "Make some patterns," she said after walking across the lawn and around the trees to the bare place where we dug. She wiped her freckled hands on her aprons. "Make me a square, then a circle. . . ."

Excited, we made a huge circle, a double circle with the inside circle being the holes and the outer circle the small piles of earth. "Now a figure eight. . . ." said Mildred, her face beaming, her bony old legs moving slowly back to the kitchen.

It was on one of those early summer afternoons, in the speckled shade of the trees, that Buzzy and I stood side by side, our hands calloused and tough, and he said, "Let's dig down . . . really down far. . . ." His feeble eyes were big and grotesque. We were not tired of digging, just tired of the limitations of the surface.

"How far?" I asked.

"All the way to Hell. . . ."

We laughed and started digging.

The basic principles of earth engineering caught up with us quickly; several cave-ins led us to pieces of plywood for side braces. At the four foot level we stopped and held a meeting. "We need buckets," I said, "to haul the dirt to the stream."

"Why?" asked Buzzy.

"Big piles of brown earth would tell Edith Joan what we are doing."

From then on, laboriously and tediously, we hauled bucket after bucket to the stream and flung it into the water. Three afternoons later we camouflaged the entrance with boxes, boards, and earth. No one knew we were on our way to Hell, not even Edith Joan.

We started in June and mixed our digging with circus playing, with reading, with bike riding, with camping out at night in the back yard, all the games and fun of summer.

Edith Joan slept until noon or later and when she did get up she

was on the phone or watching television. She argued all the time with my father and ignored Mildred's request to clean up her room. One day she dyed her short hair blonde with a black streak on the left side. When she saw me she either called me a "freak" or ignored me. Once she ran away for two nights but came back.

By July, Buzzy and I reached the twenty foot level and had built a six foot square room at the ten foot level. The vertical tunnel was three feet in diameter. A rope ladder was our access to the bottom and we hauled the buckets up with a pulley system. For lights we used candles and flashlights. What kept us going was the secrecy, power, and grandeur of what we were doing.

"You boys still digging out there?" asked Mildred when she made lunch for Buzzy and me one day. We were seated at the kitchen table, feeling our calluses. Complaining that her legs ached too much, Mildred wasn't able to walk across the lawn to the trees and see us dig. "Yes," I answered. Buzzy looked at me. "Yes, we dig every once in a while."

"Edith Joan sure needs to dig at something," Mildred said under her breath. She sat down at the table with a sigh, a cup of coffee in her hand. "That girl's gonna be the death of your father."

"Why?" I asked. "What's she doing now?"

"Stealing money, shoplifting." Mildred shook her head. "Child's got everything but sense. Stole some jewelry. Stole some money. This ain't no teenage phase, either. She's going to hell, if you ask me. . . ."

Buzzy dropped his fork.

"She's stealing things?" I asked in disbelief.

"Everybody's doing it, she says. Girl has everything. Big house. Clothes. Good father. And what's she doing? Stealing cheap jewelry because everybody's doing it. Child's going to hell, if you ask me. . . ."

Buzzy and I finished our meal in silence, then excused ourselves. On our way across the lawn to the hole, Buzzy said in shock, "Is Edith Joan going to get there before we do?"

"I don't know."

"How does she know how to get there?"

"I don't know."

"How close are we?"

"I don't know."

We dug every other day until the end of July. At the thirty foot level our enthusiasm began to wane. The hole was becoming cold

and dank. We had to wear sweaters at that level while outside the sun kept the temperature in the high eighties. "Maybe there isn't a Hell," said Buzzy.

Then on August second while I was digging and Buzzy was hauling up the bucket by the pulley, I noticed all three candles flickering. I stopped digging and stood perfectly still in order not to create air currents. In the grey, earthy coldness I felt my stomach tighten. The candles continued to flicker. Somehow air was now gently pushing itself into the hole, moving around me and rising up to the surface.

"Buzzy," I yelled. "Come down."

It took him several minutes to descend the rope ladder but when he reached the bottom I said, "I think we're close."

"Close to what?" The thickness and curved surface of his glasses reflected a hundred yellow candle flames. I couldn't see his eyes.

"Hell," I whispered.

"Wow!" he said.

We dug slowly, pushing the dirt behind us. It was simply too tight an area for anything but side-by-side digging on our knees with our hands. Then without any warning the earth gave way beneath us. "Yeeoow!" we yelled. Like two bags, we fell about six feet into a brightly lit room and were caught in a springy, soft net.

A man in a red sweatshirt carefully lowered the net and said, "We thought you might give up. But here you are at last." He had grey hair, an impish smile, and blue eyes. "Come sit down." He peered at us as we disentangled ourselves from the net and stood on the wooden floor. To the right was a door, to the left a wide sofa strewn with red, white, and blue pillows. I looked up. Above us was the bottom of the hole and a ceiling of domed earth reinforced by wooden beams.

"Well, boys, welcome to Hell," he said as we sat down. "Actually, this isn't really Main Hell. This is a midwestern tributary of Hell." He smiled and leaned forward. "You are to be congratulated for a truly amazing job of digging. We didn't think two eight-year-old boys could do it. But the hole is superb, straight, well dug, and here you are." He rubbed his hands together, then raised one finger and said, "Slight problem. Hell is closed to visitors."

Buzzy said, "How far is Main Hell?"

"Quite far, straight down." He leaned to his left and picked up a briefcase next to the sofa and opened it and took out a pile of folders.

"Through that door?" asked Buzzy, pointing to the door.

"Through the door," said the man.

We stared at the door and imagined the agony of a fiery, eternal Hell bubbling and boiling behind it.

"Sir," I said, "would you mind if I asked if you are the Devil?"

"Not at all. I'm not the Devil. I'm a regional advisor to the Devil."

He smiled again. This time I saw the black and red fire burning deep in his eyes. He also had a peculiar smell about him, somewhat like rope or hair being burned.

He opened one of the files and said, "Edith Joan. I can make a deal on Edith Joan, but neither of you nor any other members of your families are due here at all."

He thumbed through pages, wrinkled his nose, and said, "Edith Joan has before her the possibility of a hellish life, drug addiction, abortions, alcoholism, three failed marriages, two major car accidents, countless lies, blasphemy, excessive greed, and virtually endless jealousy. In addition she will run over a kitten."

Poor Edith Joan, I thought. If only our mother hadn't died. The man looked at me. "No, no," he said, "everybody comes to Hell all on their own. No excuses of any kind. You earn it or you don't."

I was amazed that he could read my thoughts.

"What's blasphemy?" asked Buzzy.

"Swearing against God."

Buzzy covered his eyes and began to shake. "Let's go home now."

The man grinned. "Tommy," he said, "I want to reward your hard work and imagination in getting here. Let me make you an offer. It will save your father a lot of grief. You bring Edith Joan down here and we'll put her to work. She'll have a taste of Hell for three weeks. Sometimes we can work remarkable transformations and save space for the truly corrupt."

He leaned forward. "Quite frankly, Hell is overcrowded these days, and I'm authorized to stem the flow just about any way I can. If Edith Joan fumbles through Hell's initiation and fails, we'll send her back after three weeks. She'll avoid a hellish life. She'll be transformed, pale and thin maybe, but wiser, loving, and infinitely patient. Your father will probably cry with joy."

"What will she do while she's here?"

"Ah, she will do truly despicable acts of collective and individual self-indulgence and cruelty. She will do and think deliciously vile things beyond your imagination. If she can't do them easily and quickly, we don't want her."

"And she'll come back and lead a good life and not call me a freak, a squirrel, or a weasel?"

"Practically guaranteed."

"And she won't smoke any more in the bathroom?"

"She will hate smoke."

How could I be wrong for myself, for my Dad, or for her? If she likes Hell, good riddance. If she doesn't, she'll come back pale and thin but wiser, loving, and infinitely patient.

"Okay," I said, "I'll get her down here."

"A deal." He held out his pink hand. I shook it.

"Edith Joan?"

She was seated in front of the television in the family room, leg over the armchair, her hand applying bright blue paint to her toenails. She wore a white T-shirt and faded black pants. She smelled of cigarettes and a thousand crushed flowers. "What's up, freak?"

I came around and sat on the floor next to the chair. "I was wondering if you know what gold looks like?" I said in a tone of great seriousness. "I don't mean a gold bracelet or ring, but a vein of raw gold in the ground. Do you know what it looks like?"

"Why, freak?" She had finished her left foot and was starting on the big toe of her right foot.

"Well, I don't know if I should tell you."

She looked at me, her black-lined eyes covering me with disdain. "Don't tell me, freak." She went back to her toes.

"I have to ask you; I guess. I can't ask Dad because I don't want him to know what I've done." I paused. "You promise you won't tell him?"

She turned to me again. "Just tell me or go away, weasel," she said angrily.

"Okay," I said. "Buzzy and I dug a hole in the back yard, a really deep hole. You have to use a rope ladder to get to the bottom. And down at the bottom we dug into this vein of dull, heavy stuff that looks like gold. But I don't know what raw gold looks like. All I know is that this stuff is kind of heavy and it might be gold but I don't know. And I can't tell Dad because the hole is really deep and he'll get mad because I dug the hole. But if it is gold. . ."

"You want me to go down the hole, don't you?" she said, smiling as if she had caught me. "You and Buzzy have some kind of trick waiting for me at the bottom, don't you?"

"No, I . . ."

"Why didn't you bring up a piece of it?"

I stammered, "Well, I . . ."

"Show me the hole," she said and stood up.

We walked across the lawn, Edith Joan in her bare feet and me in my sneakers. It was a brilliant day on earth, a fine blue sky mottled by tumbling clouds.

"Where'd you put the dirt from the hole?" she asked suspiciously. She won't need shoes in Hell, will she? I thought.

"In the stream," I said.

"How deep is the hole?" she asked.

"About thirty feet."

"Good God, thirty feet!"

She stood over the hole and couldn't believe it. She looked down into the darkness, intrigued and excited, and listened to me innocently describe the possibility of gold. She seemed almost proud that I had done this bizarre thing, her little eight-year-old brother and his bug-eyed friend had actually dug a deep, deep hole into the earth with two little red shovels. And nobody knew it.

"The vein is on the right," I said, "all the way to the bottom. You have to get down on your knees and scrape dirt away. You can't miss it." I held up a flashlight.

She circled the hole. The trees filtered the sun so that her face was shadowed a little. In this light I could see a little of our mother in her face. But Edith Joan had encrusted it with hardness, the way she walked and talked, all encrusted. Hell will knock it out of her, I hoped. She would come back pale and thin, but wiser, loving, and infinitely patient.

"You little devil," she said in conspiracy. She took the flashlight from me. "So help me God if there is anything down there other than a vein and dirt, you'll be in deep trouble when I come back," she threatened me.

"It's on the right," I said, my hands suddenly a little sweaty. "Scrape away the dirt."

She climbed down the rope ladder without looking up at me. For a few minutes I could see the top of the rope ladder, tied to a nearby tree, wiggling and shaking as she descended. Then it was still.

Buzzy came out from behind another tree, his owl eyes searching for me. He found me and we stood together. Then he looked in the hole. "That was easy," he said.

"No, it wasn't," I said. "She's smart."

We stayed there, looking in the hole. Buzzy squinted and checked his watch. "Quarter to three," he said. "Give her a half hour to make sure she's gone."

Fifteen minutes later we stretched out on the grass and I described the animals in the circus as they circled the back yard. But I couldn't muster much enthusiasm at all. I didn't even mention bareback rider Gorgeous MaComber.

I hadn't thought of how the man would get Edith Joan to go with him. Would he grab her and pull her through the door? Or would he smile and lie to her? "Honey, this way leads up," and then she would be on her way down to Hell?

Overhead the clouds bulged and twisted into great backs and shoulders. Mildred called to us. "Any cookie eaters out there?" she yelled from the back porch. We ran and got fist-sized chocolate chip cookies and then lay down on the grass, chewing and watching the clouds.

"She deserves whatever she gets," said Buzzy.

"She'll probably be back," I said, "full of stories."

"Maybe she'll like it there."

After an hour passed we knew Edith Joan was in safely in Hell. Buzzy went home. I stayed there on the grass looking over at the hole every once in a while. Why should I care about her? She never cared about me. She didn't appreciate earth, either.

I got up, walked over to the hole, untied the end of the rope ladder from the nearby tree, and dropped it to the bottom.

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FICTION

An Almost Perfect Crime

by William
F. Smith

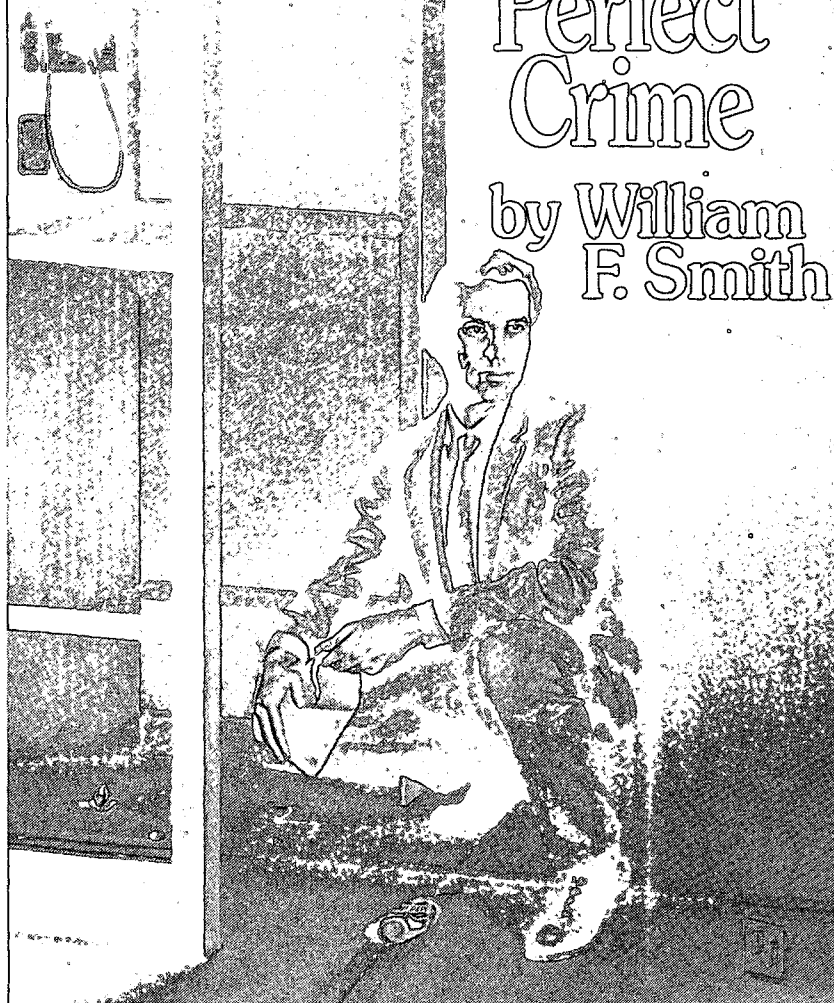


Illustration by Joe Jereda

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“According to six eyewitnesses,” said Captain Jack Parker, handing a manila folder to Detective Sergeant Raymond Stone, “a man named Richard Townsend entered a telephone booth last night, closed the door, and toppled dead a few minutes later with an ice pick in his back. Crazy, huh?”

Stone grunted a monosyllabic affirmative. “Are you sure it’s murder?”

“A blade in the back usually is. Read the report Paul Decker turned in. You know him. Meticulous.”

“Why don’t you keep him on it?” Stone suggested.

“He prefers to stick to the night shift. Decker’s excellent at accumulating details, but he’s not keen on these brain busters. He thought you might be better suited to solve this one. So do I. I’ve notified Curtis and Lissner to report to you.”

Parker returned to his office, leaving Stone to glean the salient facts from the report, which was a typical Decker job, complete with a detailed account of the crime, statements of eyewitnesses, photographs, charts showing the location of the booth, and its exact description and measurements. The works.

Stone marveled at the thoroughness of the report. He skimmed through to familiar-

ize himself with the details. A large number of fingerprints had been found both outside and inside the booth, but only Townsend’s were on the phone itself. Decker had noted that the usual litter—candy wrappers, cigarette butts, soda pop cans, and so on—was outside the booth. Each item found inside was listed separately. There were two crumpled Doublemint gum wrappers, a foot long piece of dirty string, a Dr. Pepper bottle cap, a scrap of paper with a grocery list written on it, one Lucky Strike stub, and a two inch piece of shiny black electrical tape that had been found stuck to the glass at the bottom of the booth. Decker had made the notation that the tape probably had been left by the telephone repairman who serviced the booth just prior to Townsend’s using it.

The death weapon was an ice pick with a blade four and three-quarter inches long, set in a round wooden handle a fraction over one half inch in diameter and four and a half inches long. The ice pick was in the folder, and Stone noted that although the handle was newly painted with shiny red enamel, the blade showed signs of years of use. It was an excellent homemade job, perhaps manufactured especially for the murder.

The results of the post mor-

tem were not in yet, but the medical examiner had speculated that death had probably been the result of a puncture wound through the heart. The pick had penetrated just below the left shoulder blade in a manner virtually impossible for it to have been self-inflicted. The photographs showed Townsend twisted in a heap on the floor, the handle of the weapon clearly visible in his back. The fold-in door was completely closed and held in place by the victim's body. The door had had to be taken off so that Townsend could be removed.

Nothing out of the ordinary had been found on the body, nor was anything conspicuous by its absence. Townsend had carried the normal items a man might be expected to have on his person.

Stone sighed and leaned back. Although the report was a masterpiece of detail, it contained nothing to indicate who had put the ice pick into Townsend's back or how the deed had been accomplished.

At nine Harvey Curtis and Fred Lissner came in. Stone assigned the detectives to a check on Townsend's background, personal and business, and told them to report back at noon. Having come to the conclusion that the scene of the crime was the most significant aspect of

the investigation so far, Stone decided to visit Lew Hall's Service Station at the corner of Halliday and Twenty-seventh Streets.

Lew Hall was eager to tell Stone everything he had told the "other cops."

"This guy drives in about nine last night, tells me to fill it up, and gets change for a dollar to make a phone call. I see him go into the booth and dial."

Stone noted that the booth, except for its aluminum framework, was all glass, enabling him to see straight through to the concrete block wall beyond.

"While I'm cleaning the windshield, I glance over, see him hang up, and turn to open the door. But before he gets it open, he staggers backwards, then falls on the floor. I get the hell over there quick. Some other customers seen it too and hurry over with me. We see through the glass how he's slumped over with this dagger or whatever in his back. I don't know whether he's dead or not. He could still be breathing, but he doesn't move none. We try to open the door, only his body wedges it shut. I call the cops. They have to take off the door. The whole thing takes half an hour. By then he's already dead."

"You didn't see anyone else by the booth?"

"Nary a soul," Lew replied.

"I been thinking, though. There was one other person that might have seen it. The phone booth had an out-of-order sign on it last night. The service man fixed it just before the dead guy drives in. Matter of fact, he was still at the station when the guy was in the booth. Over there at the air hoses." Lew indicated a small service island at the left of the station. "Probably didn't see nothing, though, the way he was bent over his tires. Must've drove off just before I ran to the booth."

"Did you notice the truck's number or get a good look at him?"

"Naw, you know how it is. They all look alike. A repairman and his truck. Guess I should say repairperson. Could have been a gal under that uniform and cap. Just noticed the. . . . Excuse me a minute." He dashed out to collect from a self-service customer who appeared ready to drive off without paying.

Stone studied the booth. It was a good thirty feet from any part of the station building and the same distance from the street. The door of the booth faced the station, so that anyone making a call would have his back to the pumps. On the right side of the booth were parking spaces for several cars. A small self-service air and

water island was halfway between the booth and the service bay area, exactly twenty-eight feet, four inches from the booth, according to Decker's precise measurements. The rear of the booth was no more than two feet from a seven foot concrete block wall, on the other side of which was a vacant lot.

Stone walked over and examined the structure carefully. It had suffered no vandalism. There were no holes in any of the panes of glass and the aluminum framework was intact. When the door was closed, the booth was completely sealed with the exception of a two inch ventilation space around the bottom of the structure. Stone kneeled and tried to reach into the booth with his right hand. It wouldn't go beyond the wrist. Impossible for anyone to get an ice pick into Townsend's back that way.

Inside the booth, Stone saw that the phone was attached to the right rear corner. To the left was a narrow shelf for the telephone directories, but both the yellow and white pages were hanging from it by their short lengths of chain. Even though it was daylight, Stone noticed that the booth light was not working. He recalled that Decker had stated in his report that the bulb was burned out. The telephone itself was

in perfect working order. Shaking his head, Stone walked back to Lew, who was leaning against a pump watching him.

"You said he opened the door and then staggered backwards?" Stone queried.

"No," Lew replied. "He didn't get the door opened. Just touched the handle, near as I could tell. You think someone threw the ice pick at him and he fell back into the booth?"

"It's a logical conclusion."

"Well, it's a good thing there were five other witnesses, or you might think I could've done it. The door was closed. It was like some invisible man pulled him backwards and shoved a shiv through his ribs. Only I'm tellin' you there ain't no one else in the booth or anywhere near it. And you can't throw nothing through solid glass without breaking it. You got a tough case here, sergeant."

"I'm well aware of that," Stone admitted. "Well, Mr. Hall, thanks for your help. I may drop back for another visit."

A check with the other witnesses verified Lew's version and gave Stone absolutely no new information. He returned to headquarters somewhat discouraged. He hadn't a thing that wasn't already in Decker's fine report.

The autopsy report was lying

on his desk. It proved to be a bombshell. The coroner had discovered that the ice pick wound had not been the cause of death. The point of the pick had been coated with curare, and it was the poison that had caused Townsend's death. The M.E. believed the wound alone would not have been fatal if the victim had received medical attention. He theorized that the poison had been used to make certain death would occur if the blade missed the heart.

There were other surprises in the report. Traces of opiates had been found in Townsend's blood and he had a malignant brain tumor. The M.E. didn't speculate about the significance of these two facts, leaving that to Stone.

Stone tossed the report into his out-basket just as Curtis and Lissner came in. "Well?" he said as the two detectives plopped onto straightbacked chairs by his desk.

"It's disappointing, Ray," Curtis said. "Never saw a guy less likely to get murdered than Townsend. Happily married. Has two teenaged sons. Haven't been able to dig up a ghost of a motive."

"Townsend himself?" Stone suggested gently.

"Age forty-nine. Quiet type, almost shy. No known enemies. We talked with dozens of peo-

ple. Everybody really liked him. Said he was the type who wouldn't hurt a fly. No one could imagine him ever getting murdered."

"Business?"

"Ran a bookstore with his wife. Not lucrative, but he earned a living."

"Will? Insurance?"

"Haven't had time to check on those," Lissner put in.

"Did you talk to his wife?"

"No, not yet," Curtis said. "Thought you'd prefer to do that. She's still under her doctor's care."

"All right. Go on out and do some more digging. Get a complete financial picture. Give the store a good going over, check on his insurance, and see if he left a will."

"Okay if we get some lunch first?" Lissner asked.

"Certainly. But don't make it a seven-course meal. I want some answers fast."

Helen Townsend was very attractive, even in her grief. Wearing a pink quilted bed jacket, she was propped up in bed with several pillows behind her when Dr. Wagner ushered Stone into the room. Her dark, wavy hair framed a face made pale by her ordeal. To Stone, the whole story was in her eyes, dry but still glazed from shock and re-

cent tears. Stone knew she would be devastatingly beautiful if her face were not devoid of color and if she were smiling.

Dr. Wagner, tall, ruggedly handsome, and just on the underside of fifty, stood by like a mother hen protecting her chicks. "You must realize, sergeant, that Mrs. Townsend has suffered severe shock. I hope you'll be discreet in your questioning."

"It's all right, Kurt," Helen Townsend said. "I want to do everything I can to help." She looked at Stone and waited for him to begin.

"I'll try to be brief, Mrs. Townsend," Stone said gently. "I'm fully aware of the strain you're under, but I'm certain you're anxious to learn the reason for your husband's death and who is responsible for it. I'll have to ask you some forthright questions: Do you know of any reason why someone might want to murder your husband?"

She swallowed, and spoke slowly in a way that tugged at Stone's heart. "No. I just can't understand. It's utterly inconceivable. If he'd been the victim of an accident, I could reconcile myself to it. But that he could be murdered is beyond my comprehension."

"Could there be another woman? A jealous husband?"

Dr. Wagner spoke sharply to

Stone. "Look here, I object to your asking Helen such questions at this time."

"It's all right, Kurt. No, Mr. Stone, there was no other woman, no jealous husband, and I have no lover who would want to kill my husband. One of the things I'm very grateful for is my seventeen years with Rich. We were completely faithful to one another."

Stone hoped she was right. "You worked with your husband at the store, Mrs. Townsend. Wasn't it customary for you to come home together?"

"No. I always left about two, in order to be here when the boys get home from school. A young college girl, Janice Carter, comes in shortly before I leave and also works on Saturday. Rich usually closed the store at six, but last night he stayed to check a shipment of books. I expected him about ten."

"The station he called from is at least three miles out of the way if he was driving here from the shop. I'm wondering if he went there for a particular purpose. He made a telephone call just before he was killed."

Helen Townsend bit her lips. "I know," she said in a choked voice. "I know. He called me." She buried her head in her arms and sobbed uncontrollably.

Stone didn't know what to say. He had never expected to find out whom Townsend had called. Why had he driven several miles out of his way to call his wife? Why not call her from the store?

Dr. Wagner had opened his medical bag and was preparing an injection. "I'll have to ask you to leave now, sergeant. Helen is in no condition to continue."

"All right, doctor, but, please, just one more question. Mrs. Townsend, what did your husband say to you?"

Dr. Wagner injected the sedative.

"He said he was on his way home. Then he said goodbye in a strange way. It was," she fought for control, "almost as if he knew he wouldn't be seeing me or the boys again." She closed her eyes and lay back quietly. Stone couldn't tell whether she was asleep or not.

Closing the bedroom door behind him, Dr. Wagner escorted Stone to the living room.

"I'm sorry if I disturbed her," he apologized. "Please let me know when I can talk to her again."

"Not for a day or two at least," the doctor said. "Now I think you'd better go."

"Of course. But may I ask you one or two questions?"

"What do you want to know?"

"The autopsy showed traces of drugs in Townsend's blood. I'd like that explained. Was he an addict or had you given him medication?"

Wagner considered for a moment. "Rich Townsend was no drug addict. As a matter of fact he took the prescription only with reluctance. About four months ago, he came in for a checkup. He mentioned he'd been having headaches which aspirin didn't help. I gave him a thorough exam and found he had a brain tumor. Inoperable. I told him he had six months to a year at the most. He took it better than I expected and asked me not to tell Helen or the boys. I probably will now that he's gone. It might help."

"I see. Tell me, was he in much pain?"

"He said no, but he could have been lying. A tumor like that can be relatively painless at first, but as the pressure increases, so does the pain. I gave him a prescription, and I suppose he had it filled. He wasn't a great talker, you know. Preferred to suffer in silence."

"Would the end have come quickly, or would it have been a long, lingering one?"

"Hard to say exactly," Wagner said. "He might have had several months in severe agony, or he could have gone just like that." He snapped his fin-

gers. "The odds are for the longer period, but we'll never know for certain now. I can't see that it has anything to do with his murder. Or are you thinking it was suicide?"

"We're looking into all possibilities," Stone said. "I need all the information I can get. Have you been his doctor long?"

"For over sixteen years," Wagner admitted. "I've been his friend even longer."

"Do you know if he took out an insurance policy recently?"

"I don't think so. I happen to give all the physicals for the agency that insures him. I couldn't have signed a favorable exam report, which is required before a policy is issued. I suppose he could have gone to another company, but I don't think he could have fooled the doctors. You might check with his agent, Hal Harris. I'm sure he'll know more about it."

"I'll do that," Stone replied, moving toward the front door. He turned to face the physician. "By the way, doctor, do you happen to know anything about curare?" He noticed his question brought a slight smile from Dr. Wagner.

"I don't wish to seem immodest, but I happen to be an expert in that field. Why do you ask?"

"The coroner has attributed Mr. Townsend's death to curare on the point of the ice pick."

Stone paused slightly to allow Wagner to make a comment, but the doctor betrayed no reaction to the news. "Now I'm wondering how easy it would be for a person to get his hands on some of that poison."

"Not too easy for a non-medical person unless he has friends along the Amazon." Wagner replied. "Curare does have medicinal uses. Someone working for a pharmaceutical firm might be able to obtain it. Say, here's a coincidence. Some crude curare I had in my office was stolen just a few weeks ago."

Stone's eyebrows shot upward. "Oh?"

"You can get complete details from your burglary department," Wagner said. "When I reported the theft, I assumed the burglar was a drug addict, since my entire supply of drugs was taken. But it could have been the curare he was after, and he took the rest as a cover-up."

"Possibly. May I ask why you had such a bizarre poison in your office?"

"It's not so bizarre, sergeant," Wagner explained. "It's quite a natural hunting tool for South American Indians, and refined forms of it are often used in the medical field as a muscle relaxant. For the past several years I've been doing research to find additional uses for it. As an av-

ocation I've made many canoe trips on the Amazon River, and I became interested there in curare. I was able to obtain a considerable quantity of it for research purposes."

"Is it always fatal?"

"If the dose is large enough. In its crude form, curare is a deadly poison when injected into the victim's bloodstream. Death occurs because, to put it simply, the respiratory muscles are paralyzed, and the victim dies because he is unable to breathe. If it's injected into a vein, a man could die almost instantaneously. With a smaller dose, a person would live longer, depending on his size, and might even recover. There are antidotes which, if administered soon enough, can reverse the effect and save the victim's life. If taken orally, the poison is ineffective. This is why the natives are able to eat the meat of poisoned animals."

"Who knew you had the poison in your office?"

"Only several thousand local TV viewers, in addition to my office staff and a few patients."

Stone paused to let this startling news sink in. "Would you mind explaining?"

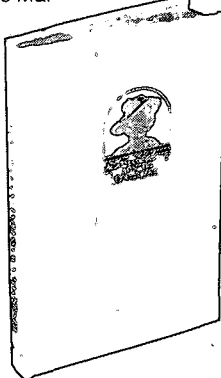
"Not at all. It's really very simple. I've taken movies of all my Amazon journeys and show them on TV. Channel 12 has a program called *Adventurous*

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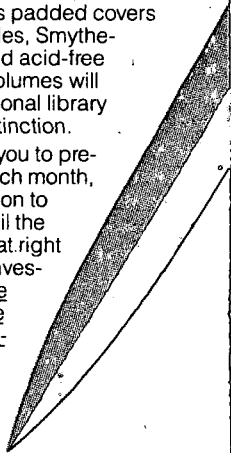
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Voyage, which I appeared on a few weeks ago. During the interview portion of the show, the host asked me questions about the poison the Indians in the film had used to kill game animals. I explained everything, even mentioning that I was doing research with the poison in my office lab. I didn't know someone was going to steal it in order to kill Rich Townsend."

"We don't know where the curare came from, but it's a good bet it could have been yours. You don't suppose Mr. Townsend could have taken some from your office?"

The doctor reflected a moment. "He had the opportunity. But for what purpose?"

"Perhaps to bring a swift end to his painful headaches," Stone suggested.

"Not Rich. He wasn't one to take his own life. Yet if the pain were unbearable. . . ."

Stone extended his hand. "Thank you, Dr. Wagner. You've given me some very useful information. I'll try not to disturb Mrs. Townsend again unless it is absolutely necessary." The front door was closed behind him, and Stone returned to headquarters.

store. Curtis had been able to ascertain that all of Townsend's property was held jointly with his wife. The big surprise was that Townsend had taken out life insurance for half a million dollars just three months previously. Stone whistled and gave Hal Harris a call.

Harris was on edge. Stone could hear the worry in his voice as he explained the situation. "Mr. Townsend had all of his business and personal insurance with my agency. Until about three months ago he had only twenty-five thousand in term on his life. Then he came in and wanted a policy for half a million. That's not so uncommon nowadays. You know, when a man reaches his late forties he begins to be a little more concerned about what might happen to his family if he should suddenly die. He wants a lot more protection. I was only too happy to service his insurance needs. I sent him to Dr. Kurt Wagner, who does all our insurance physicals. Townsend came back with a report stating he was in excellent health and fully insurable. However, he did seem somewhat concerned about making the monthly premiums."

"Did you try to talk him out of it?"

"Of course not. My business is trying to talk people into buy-

Curtis's second report was in Stone's in-basket. Lissner had yet to return from the book-

ing insurance. He paid the first month's premium right away, of course, but he was considerably late with the second, and missed the third completely. The policy is still in force because there's a thirty-day grace period. Sergeant, the company that underwrote the policy is not going to like paying. Any chance it was suicide?"

"You're the second person to ask about that today," Stone replied. "All I can say is that we are exploring all possibilities. Does his policy have a suicide clause?"

"You bet. Standard two-year," Harris said. "By the way, sergeant, I've got a very special policy for police officers. If you're interested, I'll send you a brochure."

"Well, thank you very much, Mr. Harris. I'll get in touch with you if I need any more information."

Stone hung up and mulled over the conversation. Dr. Wagner had stated he could not have signed a favorable physical exam report for Townsend, yet Harris had just told him that Townsend had a clean bill of health from Dr. Wagner. Why would Harris lie? Stone could think of no reason. Why would Wagner lie? Townsend was his friend, and he might do it for a friend, especially if he were in love with the friend's

wife. The doctor could have wanted to be certain the widow would be well provided for after her husband's death. Stone decided it would be interesting to see a copy of that report.

Lissner's rushing in caused Stone's train of thought to run off the tracks. The young detective had a smile a mile wide across his face.

"I see you've had some luck," Stone remarked.

Lissner could hardly contain himself, but he wanted to milk the suspense. "You call it luck. I call it hard digging."

"Well, let's have it."

The burly detective took a crumpled slip of paper from his pocket and spread it out on the desk. "Found this in the wastebasket in Townsend's office at the bookstore."

Stone read the note. *Call from Lew's station—9 P.M.*

"Know who wrote it?"

"Townsend himself," Lissner replied. "The bookstore was closed today, of course, but Townsend's salesclerk, Janice Carter, showed up while I was there and helped me search. She identified the handwriting. The paper's from a pad by the telephone. Someone set him up for the kill."

"Could be," Stone said. "On the other hand, he could have simply written himself a reminder. But it does show he

knew where Lew's is located. Didn't even have to write down the address. Did you come up with anything else?" He noticed that Lissner was still grinning.

"Not much. Everything was in good shape, especially Janice. Now there's one bright chick. When I mentioned insurance, she dug these out of the files. I can't see they have anything to do with the case."

He handed Stone two letters. The first one was from some insurance company's main office, informing Townsend that the enclosed check for \$3,482.87 was in full payment for his accident claim, policy number 987 756 32. The second letter was from Hal Harris, thanking Townsend for returning the insurance company's check for \$3,482.87, which had been sent to him inadvertently by the head office of one of the firms Harris represented. The letter went on to explain that such checks were normally sent to the local representative, who then presented them to the claimant. Through a computer error, the check had been erroneously sent directly to Townsend; moreover, it actually was intended for another Richard Townsend, a man who had been involved in an automobile accident. Harris thanked Townsend and commended him

for his honesty in returning a check he could easily have cashed.

"More evidence that Townsend was a real nice guy," Lissner commented.

Stone just hummed, not mentioning the matter of the spurious physical report. Or was it spurious? Dr. Wagner might have lied about telling Townsend about his tumor. He had volunteered much confidential medical information. He could have given Townsend a favorable report for personal reasons. A beautiful widow with half a million could be sweet temptation.

After Curtis returned, without much useful information, Stone sent him and Lissner out with instructions to check very carefully on Dr. Wagner, Hal Harris, Lew Hall, Janice Carter, and any other close friends or business associates of Townsend. He specifically instructed them to be alert for any connections one might have with another.

For a few minutes Stone sat thinking. The threads of evidence he had were now beginning to form a pattern in his mind. Then he called the telephone company. As he had expected, he was told that the phone booth at Lew's station had not been out of order and that no service truck had been

dispatched to repair it. Mr. Larking, the manager, added that the truck seen at Lew's was probably one that had been stolen and was later found abandoned a mile or so from the station. Larking was of the opinion the truck had been taken by a gang of coin box burglars. Numerous other trucks had been "borrowed" for a few hours during the past several days. It was the gang's M.O. to place an out-of-order sign on a booth, then send a "service" man, who calmly emptied the coin box as he "repaired" the phone. The company had lost several thousands of dollars in the past few days.

Although Larking said officers from Burglary had already checked the stolen truck, Stone insisted that it be kept out of service until he personally released it. He thanked Larking for his cooperation, hung up, and dialed Burglary. Sergeant Kendrick answered.

"Kenny," Stone asked, "what can you give me on the phone truck stolen last night?"

"Not much. Wiped clean. Not a single usable print. We think it was used by the coin box looters. It's their M.O. all the way, and they're known to be working this area."

"How much was taken from the booth at Lew's station?"

"Funny you should ask,"

Kendrick replied. "Nothing."

"How do you explain that?"

"On that kind of job they use a key or pick the lock and put everything back in order. Ordinarily we don't know a booth's been hit until a company collector opens the box and finds only a few coins. We wouldn't have checked the box at Lew's station if Townsend hadn't been killed there, but when we did, we found it nearly full. I figure Townsend's coming scared the guy off. He was probably waiting around the water and air hoses until the coast was clear so he could have another try. When he sees all the commotion, he beats it."

"But the phony repairman was there almost ten minutes before Townsend arrived. Wouldn't that have given him time to clean out the box?"

"Normally more than enough. But he could have run into difficulties. The phone company's been installing tougher locks recently."

"Sounds logical," Stone conceded. "Okay, Kenny, thanks. Ring me if anything you find ties in with Townsend's death."

Kendrick's explanation fit Lew Hall's story all the way, but Stone had an uneasy feeling that something wasn't as logical as Kendrick's version made it seem. The sudden arrival of Curtis and Lissner

interrupted his thoughts.

The subordinates dragged up chairs and plopped into them. It had been a tedious shift and Stone could tell from their demeanor that they were anxious to call it quits for the day and go home. Stone felt the same.

"Okay, boys, let's hear it."

"Hell, Ray," Curtis complained, "we're up a blind alley. We can't find a motive for anyone to kill Townsend."

"Just tell me what you've learned."

"Wagner's been a friend of Townsend for nearly twenty years. He's been a widower for six. No children. Admittedly he's fond of Helen Townsend, but we couldn't come up with any evidence of hanky-panky. Wagner knew Townsend had only months to live. All he had to do was sit around and wait if he wanted the wife. He's got a good practice. Makes great money. Several years ago he helped out Townsend financially." Curtis unwrapped a stick of chewing gum and slid it into his mouth. He caught Stone looking at him. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not if you keep it noiseless. Continue."

Curtis shifted the wad to the side of his mouth. "Hal Harris moves in an entirely different social circle than Townsend did. He's the country club type.

Young, dynamic. Hell, he's only twenty-nine, but he has an extremely lucrative business. He has a gorgeous wife, no kids. His only connection with Townsend is that he happens to be his insurance agent."

"What about any others? Lew Hall, the bookstore girl?"

Lissner stirred uneasily. "Nothing there, Ray. Janice Carter is just a college student who works part time at the bookstore. No romantic involvement with Townsend. She's got a steady boyfriend. Townsend bought his gas regularly at a station downtown. Probably had never been to Lew's before, but he could have driven past it many times because it's near Dr. Wagner's office."

"It would be great to find a motive," Curtis added. "A motive would lead to a suspect. Now we don't have either."

"So where does that leave us?" Lissner answered his own question: "With an unsolvable murder. Cripes, let's face it, this one's impossible. No one could've killed Townsend from either inside or outside the booth."

Curtis was quick to agree. "Right. And even though Townsend had a motive for suicide, he couldn't have stabbed himself in the back. Not even a well-trained contortionist could have done that. And even if he

could have, he would have left prints on the ice pick handle. And there were no prints."

All three sat silent, thinking. After a few moments, Stone said, "Look, either it's murder or suicide. There's no way we can call it an accident. Now, Townsend did have a compelling motive for suicide. He had a brain tumor and could have been suffering unbearable pain. But why would he want his suicide to look like murder?"

Curtis's eyes widened with sudden understanding. "The insurance! His wife couldn't collect if he took his own life."

"Right. But why such a bizarre death?" Stone wanted to know. "He could have 'accidentally' stepped in front of a vehicle moving at high speed or driven his car into a telephone pole, and there would have been no question of suicide or murder."

Lissner was right on it. "Townsend was a really nice, thoughtful guy. He never wanted to do anything to hurt anyone. He probably felt a car accident might involve others or that he might be horribly injured but not killed. I think he figured if he set up an impossible murder, no one could be charged with the crime, and his family would be certain to collect his insurance. He'd taken one of those pain-killing pills

and put curare on the ice pick to make death quick and certain."

Curtis put a damper on this theory. "Yeah, but how?"

Stone didn't answer the question. "That's what I want you two to think about. Go on home, get a good night's rest, and we'll talk it over in the morning."

After Curtis and Lissner had left, Stone sat meditating. He let his mind replay the conversation with Sergeant Kendrick and suddenly it was clear to him why Kendrick's logical explanation was not so logical. Stone decided it would be very wise to visit the scene of the crime once more.

Lew waved to him as he pulled into the station. It was nine P.M.—about the same time that Richard Townsend had died on the previous night.

"Hi, sergeant! What can I do for you?"

Stone nodded a greeting. "Mind keeping an eye on me the way you did on Townsend?" He walked over to the booth, stepped inside, closed the door, and performed a brief experiment. Then he went back to the pumps.

"Well, Mr. Hall?"

Lew pushed back his cap and scratched his forehead. "Looked like you were reenacting the crime. You went through all

the same motions the dead guy did, 'cept you didn't fall down dead. How come?"

"It helps me immensely in solving crimes if I don't fall down dead," Stone retorted with a suggestion of a smile. "Now pretend I'm the telephone repairman. Tell me if what I do is about what you saw last night."

Stone drove over to the booth. He got out of his car, entered the booth, closed the door, took the receiver off the hook, put it back, bent down, straightened up, then stepped outside to the back of the booth. He knelt for a moment, then moved slowly over to the air and water service island, returned to the booth, and drove his car to the island, where he checked the tires. He walked back to where Lew was standing.

"Pretty good show, sergeant," Lew laughed. "Like I said this morning, I didn't see him all the time, but I'd say he did pretty much what you just went through."

"Thanks for your help, Mr. Hall." Stone extended his hand and got a firm return shake from the station operator.

"Don't mention it. Think it'll help you find the killer?"

"It wouldn't surprise me at all," Stone flung over his shoulder and he got into his car and drove off.

Harvey Curtis was already in the squad room when Stone arrived at eight the following morning. Lissner came swinging in moments later with that mile-wide grin across his face.

"Looks as if you have something to tell us," Stone said.

"Would you believe I've solved this one? I knew my TV watching would pay off."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense," Curtis said.

"You know how we were talking about Townsend being the only one with a motive but we couldn't figure out how he could have got that ice pick in his back? Well, I can tell you, thanks to a movie I saw last night. It's called *Rage in Heaven*. Stars Ingrid Bergman and Robert Montgomery. Both dead now, but they live on in the movies. Maybe you saw it?"

"Can't say that I have," Stone replied. "Well, get on with your story."

"The picture's about this nutty millionaire who kills himself so it looks like murder, so the guy he thinks is his wife's lover will get executed. The guy wedges a knife in the door jamb, then walks backwards into it. He falls on the floor and it looks like somebody has stabbed him in the back. That's how Townsend did it. He wipes the handle of the ice pick clean, and hold-

ing it by the tip, puts it into the return coin slot, which held it at the right height and angle to penetrate his heart. Then all he had to do was to be sure someone was around to witness his murder and fall backward onto the blade. Sort of *hara-kiri* in reverse."

Curtis slapped his thigh. "Hot damn, Fred, that's it! Suicide made to look like murder. That's the only solution. Well, Ray, it looks like we can toss this one in the closed file."

"I don't think so," Stone said. "Townsend didn't kill himself; he was murdered. A very clever murder, which was supposed to be termed suicide. Just as you two did."

"Come again," Lissner blurted.

"I don't get it," Curtis admitted.

Stone sighed. The two detectives were good investigative officers, but without much imagination. "The murder of Townsend was well planned and executed. Incidentally, Fred, I thought of the ice-pick-in-the-coin-slot ploy yesterday and nearly came to the same conclusion you did. I let you go through the suicide theory to see if you would agree it was the only solution, and you did. That's the conclusion the killer wanted. He knew we'd sooner or later figure out how Town-

send could have put the ice pick into his own back. Once we thought of that, we'd call it suicide and close the case. I'll admit I was almost ready to do it. But a few things didn't fit."

"Such as?" queried Lissner.

"First, the telephone booth was supposedly out of order and had been fixed just before Townsend used it. Logically the repairman's fingerprints should have been all over the phone, yet only Townsend's were found. That told me that the repairman must have wiped the phone clean. No legitimate repairman would have done that. He might have cleaned the phone, but his prints should have been on it. Also a genuine company employee would have replaced the burnt-out light bulb and swept out the booth before putting it back into service. This one didn't. That tells me he was a phony."

"But," Lissner interrupted, "the phone company told us he was a fake attempting to rifle the coin box. We know that."

"We know nothing of the kind," Stone said gently. "Sure, he could have been one of the gang. Stranger coincidences have happened. But a couple of things told me he wasn't. If he had been attempting to break into the coin box, he wouldn't have taken down the out-of-order sign before successfully

looting it and putting everything back in order. If he hadn't opened the box in a few minutes, he would have run. He certainly wouldn't have waited around for a second chance."

Both Curtis and Lissner were more than a little dubious. Lissner had come up with a perfectly good explanation of Townsend's death, and they were reluctant to abandon it. However, they could see some logic to Stone's reasoning. "What else?" Lissner asked.

"That piece of electrical tape found in the booth. We assumed that the phone company's serviceman left it there. But remember the phone company hadn't sent out anyone to fix the phone, so that little piece of tape set me thinking. It convinced me that the fake repairman murdered Townsend and then drove off in the stolen truck while Lew and the other witnesses were discovering the body."

The two detectives looked at each other and shook their heads. Curtis spoke for both of them. "I can see how Townsend could have killed himself, Ray, but what you say is impossible. The booth was completely closed. How could anyone get the ice pick into the booth without breaking the glass?"

"Very simply," Stone explained. "He put it into the

booth before Townsend entered."

Curtis seemed puzzled. "Okay, say the ice pick was in the booth when Townsend entered. Why didn't he see it? How'd the fake repairman get it into his back when he was at least thirty feet away?"

Stone hesitated. In his mind he had already worked out the solution to how the crime was committed and he was positive he was correct. "The ice pick wasn't in the coin return slot. The killer used compressed air to project the ice pick into Townsend."

"Compressed air?" The puzzled look remained on Curtis's face.

"You know that Lew's station has water and air hoses situated at a distance from the gas pumps, so drivers using those facilities don't hold up the gas lines. It's the only place in town with a setup like that. That's why the murder occurred there. That's why Townsend was lured to that telephone booth. It had been converted into a death chamber. The mechanics of the thing are simple. Dr. Wagner's mentioning South American Indians hunting with the poison started me thinking. The hunters use poison darts and blowguns. The killer used the ice pick as his dart and had his own version of a blowgun."

"Sounds complicated to me," Lissner remarked.

"Not really. This is the way I think it happened. The murderer, posing as a telephone repairman, arrives in the stolen truck ostensibly to fix the phone. Earlier he had put an out-of-order sign on the booth to keep it free for his use. He then attaches his blowgun—a lightweight cylinder of some kind, probably cardboard or plastic, and about five inches long—to the underside of the telephone book shelf with some electrical tape, so that it hangs just slightly below the shelf and points to a predetermined spot which he is sure will coincide with the victim's heart. The shelf is just slightly lower than the shoulder blade of a man of Townsend's height. The killer inserts the ice pick into the tube, which is just a fraction wider than the diameter of the handle. Hanging phone books effectively conceal the device from anyone entering or standing in the booth."

Stone paused to see if Curtis or Lissner wanted to make a comment. Neither did.

"Attached to the closed end of the cylinder is a length of transparent flexible tubing—probably plastic—which the killer runs through the rear ventilation opening at the bottom of the booth. He uses a cou-

ple of short pieces of electrical tape to hold the thin hose against the framework, where it is virtually invisible. Then he goes over to the air and water island, connects his tubing to an air hose, and pretends to be checking his tires. A few seconds later Townsend enters the death chamber. The killer uses the free compressed air supplied by Lew to blow his 'dart' into Townsend's back. He gives a hard tug on the tubing; the cylinder comes loose from the shelf and drops to the floor. The killer pulls it and the tubing over to his truck and drives off just as Lew and the other witnesses are rushing to the booth. Unfortunately for the murderer, one small piece of his tape remains in the booth. Any questions?"

Lissner was dubious and blunt. "Well, it's a helluva lot more complicated than my suicide theory, but I'll have to admit, it does account for all those bothersome little details."

Curtis went further. "Okay, suppose we agree that the phony repairman is the killer. How do we find out who he is? He wasn't recognized and left no fingerprints."

The reaction of the two officers to his splendid deductions was not as enthusiastic as Stone would have liked. To give them time to appreciate his mental

efforts, he got up and walked to the window. The view wasn't good—the police parking lot with a couple of billboards thrown in for good measure. He turned to face his subordinates.

"I know," he teased. "Don't you?"

Both shook their heads.

"I take it we agree that Townsend was murdered. Okay, then we have to accept as fact that the murder was conceived to lead the police to label it suicide, just as you did, Fred. The murderer has to be someone who knew Townsend might have a reason to kill himself and make it appear to be murder."

Jumping to conclusions was one of Curtis's weaknesses. "Dr. Wagner! He was the only one who knew Townsend had a tumor. And he had possession of the poison. He could easily have faked that robbery. He could get his hands on the insurance money by marrying the widow."

"Wagner knew Townsend was going to die," Stone said, "but I don't believe he knew about the insurance, since he was aware Townsend was not insurable. And even if he did know about it, he had no motive to kill Townsend, since the man was going to die in a few months. Now, we know that Townsend didn't tell his family about his illness, and Wagner says he told no one. I believe him. But

Townsend himself may have told another person, and I'm certain he did."

Curtis and Lissner sat there with open mouths.

"Fred, get a warrant and search for rubber or plastic tubing, red paint, and electrical tape. Also check the area where the telephone truck was abandoned. The blowgun device may have been discarded near there. I'd sure like to get a look at that thing. Harve, you bring in the suspect for questioning."

"Who?" both detectives asked.

"Hal Harris."

By five in the afternoon proof that Stone's deductions were amazingly accurate started coming in. A search of Harris's garage yielded some plastic tubing, a can of paint that matched that on the ice pick handle, and a roll of tape like the piece found in the booth. Detective Lissner even managed to come up with the death device Harris had put together. It was found by neighborhood youngsters in a trash dumpster a few blocks from where the phone truck had been abandoned. Lissner had enlisted the kids in the search and it had paid off for both the detective and the children. It had cost him twenty dollars in rewards, but it was well worth the money,

for Harris's fingerprints were all over the gimmick. The device looked almost exactly as Stone had envisioned it—a five inch piece of PVC sprinkler pipe on one end of a forty foot length of quarter-inch plastic tubing and a connecting tire valve on the other. The files at Harris's office contained a copy of the medical report supposedly signed by Dr. Wagner. It was an obvious forgery.

The result of all this evidence was that Hal Harris, after having been questioned for more than two hours in the presence of his attorney, calmly dictated and signed a full confession. It was probably his best move, for by doing so he was certain to avoid the death penalty.

At six in the evening Sergeant Ray Stone sat in an upholstered chair in front of Captain Jack Parker's desk. Parker wanted some personal explanations. "I still don't see how you knew it was Harris."

"It had to be Harris or Wagner. Those were the only two who knew of Townsend's impending death. Wagner had no reason to murder Townsend. Harris was the only one with a motive. Townsend was blackmailing him."

Parker leaned forward eagerly. "How'd you figure that out?"

"Townsend managed to get a

whopping big insurance policy when he had only a short time to live. Dr. Wagner said he didn't give Townsend an insurance physical, yet Harris told me Townsend came in with a clean bill of health from Wagner. He was lying. No doctor lets the patient carry the exam report back to the company. He sends it. Harris had to have forged the examination report that was sent in with the policy application. It wasn't worth the risk to do that unless someone forced him. That someone could only have been Townsend."

This explanation did not completely satisfy Parker. "What did Townsend know that enabled him to blackmail Harris?"

"It's not so much what he knew, but what he guessed," Stone replied. "Those two letters we found in Townsend's files put me onto it. Harris was filing false claims and pocketing the proceeds. Townsend threatened to tell Harris's parent companies to examine his claims for fraud unless Harris got the policy approved. Townsend, normally a very nice and honest guy, was not concerned for himself when he learned of his terminal illness. He wanted his family to be without financial worries after he was gone. That's why he felt forced to blackmail Harris."

Stone leaned back, lacing his fingers behind his head. "Any more questions, Jack, or have I completely satisfied your curiosity?"

"Not quite," Parker said. "How did Harris get Townsend to go to the telephone booth? After all, he was the black-mailer. You'd think he'd set up the meeting."

"We got the answer from Harris himself. Townsend wasn't able to come up with the third month's premium, so he asked Harris to give him a receipt stating the premium had been paid. Now Harris began to sweat. If Townsend didn't die soon—and many who are given months hang on for years—he was afraid he would be paying all the future premiums for Townsend. He had to come up with a way to get rid of Townsend and have the policy canceled without an extensive investigation. 'Suicide' was the answer. It would appear as if

Townsend were trying to bilk the insurance company by faking his own murder."

Stone's pausing briefly caused Parker to blurt out, "So what did Harris do?"

"He telephoned Townsend and suggested that for formality's sake the premium should be sent to the main office. He persuaded Townsend to go to Lew's station at nine o'clock that night and make a phone call from the booth there. Harris told Townsend that when he got back to his car he would find the necessary cash in an envelope on the front seat. Then all Townsend would have to do was to deposit the money in his account and send in a check for the premium."

"You know, Ray, Harris's plan was ingenious," Parker remarked. "It would have succeeded, too, if it hadn't been for your keen observations."

"Could be," Stone said. "It was an almost perfect crime."

FICTION

Looking Back

by Theodore
H. Hoffman

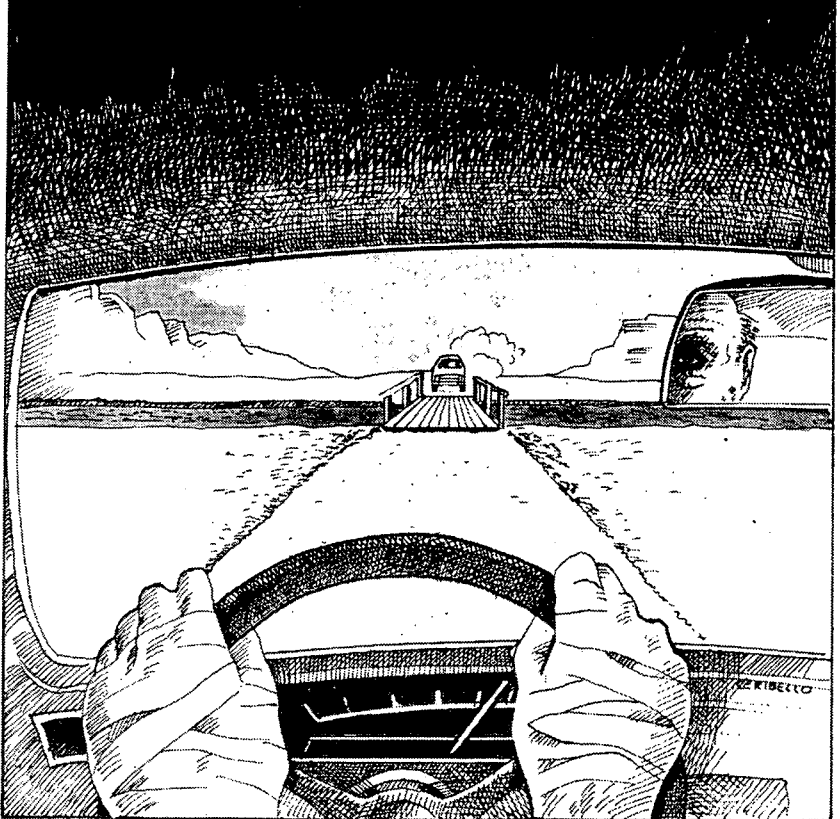


Illustration by Jim Ceribello

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Focus tight on the young woman's face as she rolls down the van window to speak to the old man one last time. The window rasps by a deep gouge in the door frame. She looks at the gouge for a long moment. Pan slowly to the old man's face; he has followed her gaze. Then he smiles and says, "You be patient with him," and she smiles and nods, and says, "And you be patient with yourself." His scarred and tanned fingers burrow into his pocket, and withdraw a well-packed square of folded-over money. Gratefully, he hands it to her; gratefully, she accepts it.

Hold their faces in a two-shot, as they exchange looks weighted with private meaning. Pause for an instant more, as they say simultaneously, "Are you all right?"—

—now pull back as she turns the ignition key with calloused fingers and drives slowly away. The man waves. Faster now, pull back and up, into the clear country sky. Keep looking down. Watch the neatly-kept farm recede, slender bundles of wheat stacked behind the small barn; watch the dust stir as she carefully turns past his empty pickup truck, toward the highway. The morning sun glints off the pickup's side view mirror and off the van's side window, obscuring the movement behind it. Pull back, back, not just in space but back in time; back to their first encounter, which both are recalling; when it seemed death was drawing them together. . .

Start high, high above. Look down on a plain, slumbering brown and orange in the late afternoon sun. A road cuts through the thirsty dirt like a scar. Far to the west—for we are very high up—is an impression of roiling dust, churned up by a vehicle on the road. Far to the east is another small belch of dust. The dust clouds are miles apart, seemingly on a collision course. Halfway between them, a long trickle of river bisects the road. A thin bridge spans the river.

Move closer, toward the eastbound vehicle. Circle down like one of the buzzards that ride the parched breezes. The dust is thick, but visible through it is a pickup truck. An eroded pickup truck the color of a shadow at dusk. It rattles over potholes.

In the bed of the truck are crates, many crates; nails and bits of chicken wire do a jitterbug on the metal floor. Long-stemmed tools—a spade, two hoes, a scythe—stand on end, wedged among the crates, their gleaming heads gazing blindly over the cab.

Now hover closer, to the driver's open window. Outside, the side view mirror has been torn from its moorings. Inside, hands gingerly

grasp the steering wheel. Bandaged hands; mummy's hands. The bandages end at the wrist, but the skin of the arm, of the neck, of the face, is so leathery it too looks mummified. It is the skin of Cyrus Farrow.

Cyrus Farrow. Once, his hair was stiff and golden like the wheat that played in the wind on his land. His eyes, the moist brown of the good wood of his farmhouse. His mind, the spry playmate of a man in love with life and with the right woman. Once; and not so long ago.

Look again at the mummy hands. Cyrus cut them on the day of Edna's funeral. Through the condolences, through the eulogy, even through the lowering of that crate-like coffin, Cyrus held his agony inside. But when he was driving from the cemetery, and saw the image of Edna's grave receding in the rear view mirror, he vented his helplessness on it; and he threw the pieces as far as he could. He let his hands bleed. He let them bleed even after he arrived home. He sat on the front steps, not watching the red speckles multiplying in the dust at his feet. Waiting, hoping, for Edna to fetch a damp cloth and dab the pain away.

Now his hands are throbbing. Each throb is an unbidden echo from the past. That is why Cyrus is driving today, too fast. In the crates he has thrown Edna's belongings: her medicine, her clothes, her jewelry, her magazines, her sketches, almost all the photos of her Cyrus could find. What he will do with the crates and their contents he does not know. But the tools—yes, the tools need sharpening, he tells himself again. He'll take the tools to Claude's Hardware in town; it will give him a chance to unload Edna's things. They only take up space, get in his way. Once he's rid of them—Goodwill, maybe, or the Salvation Army—he can get on with his life. He cannot live in a haunted house any more.

Pull back from Cyrus, and look in the bed of the pickup. From one of the crates, a sleeve from Edna's church dress flutters. Waving goodbye, or hello. Reaching out seemingly against the wind, the sleeve works its way between the handle of the scythe and the crates the handle rests against. The sleeve struggles to free itself.

Glance again at the road, at how pitted it is. Cyrus does not avoid the potholes, even though they make the pickup lurch and jar his hands. It is when he thuds through one of the larger ones that the sleeve yanks free, upsetting the scythe. The scythe falls sidewise, striking the wall of the bed. Its handle jams between crates. The scythe is extending over the highway, blade forward.

It is caught fast. Even the wind screams as the blade slices through it. Cyrus, deafened by the throbbing of his hands, does not look back. The sleeve waves, hello or goodbye.

Fly far down the road, miles. In the distance, you see it, bathed in red sunlight. It is a van that looks as though it could remember when cars had fins. On the driver's side, through a custom-made window near the back of the van, a dog is craning his head. The wind makes the dog's tongue flap against his cheek; his ears retreat from the wind. He is a collie, named Boy. He watches the plains rush by, and looks at his owner's image in the side view mirror.

His owner looks back and smiles. Daniella Stirm is nineteen years old and often has to dig out her driver's license to prove it. With one hand, she is driving the van. Her van, that she bought with her money that she saved working at her job. Her van is piled with belongings. Clothes hang from a cord stretched the width of the van. She doesn't own a stereo or tape deck, but two of her boxes hold her records and tapes. Another box guards her typewriter and two thousand sheets of unsullied white paper. Daniella is going to write up her experiences from this trip, and sell them for enough money that she will never have to go back to her father.

"How you doing, Boy!" she calls over her shoulder, above the synthesized assault from the radio. Boy squints into the sun and barks. Daniella laughs; the laugh of a child told she is old enough to stay up a half hour later. She is wearing a black T-shirt, from which the faces of the rock group Motley Crue snarl. Her jeans are cut short. She cut them herself, three nights ago. This is the outfit she wore when she faced her father for the last time, and basked in his look of distaste.

Daniella is driving fast. She has places to go, pages to fill. She hasn't much money, but when she runs really low, she will get a part-time job in some backwater town, like the one they passed a few miles back. This is what she tells Boy; what she has told him through several towns. Boy trusts her, and the feeling is mutual.

Now, get ready to return, back down the road. But take a last look at Boy, stretching his head over the road, looking this way and that.

Cyrus is thinking something he does not want to think. He is relieved there are no other cars on the road, oncoming. He does not want to drive head-on into one.

Just beyond his peripheral vision, the scythe leans over the bed wall. The blade gleams dully as the sun sinks. The scythe's shadow, distorted, is thrown ahead, gouging through the ruts and pits of the highway. It might be seen by an attentive driver.

But take a close look at Cyrus Farrow's face. It is lined, as rutted as the road. Look at the lines, around his vagrant eyes, his mouth. They are the lines of a face that has smiled often in three-quarters of a century. Laugh lines. But, like everything else Cyrus is neglecting, the lines are drooping, weak from disuse.

Look at the empty seat beside Cyrus. Note how there is a natural sag that comes from having a frequent passenger. Someone who leans toward the driver, who holds onto the dashboard at those worn spots, there and there, when the driver playfully takes a turn too tight. Note the scuff marks on the floor, from high-heeled shoes that have dug their trails into the mat over years of Sunday services. Note the seat belt, still buckled, as though the passenger had been there but evaporated. And note how Cyrus still buckles his; habit now, something he once told Edna he'd never learn to do.

Pull back, as Cyrus edges down on the accelerator, and watch his pickup urged along by the crimson solar gaze.

Daniella cannot see the ambulance racing up behind her. Boy's open-mouthed face fills the side view mirror. So when the ambulance pulls over to pass her, she is startled. Daniella is driving fast, but the ambulance is really moving. It passes close. Close, with a roar of its siren. "Hey!" she cries. "Look out, Boy!" Boy does pull back—not all the way in, just a bark's length away. Daniella winces and holds her left ear, cursing; even the radio is drowned out. Siren screaming, the ambulance rushes by.

"You okay, Boy!" Daniella cries through the swirling dust. "You okay?" Boy has his head full out the window, and he barks, and barks. Daniella's snarl shames Motley Crue as she watches the ambulance speed into the distance. "Why'd you have to pass so close, gas-hole!" To herself, she says, Probably hired by Daddy. She sets her jaw and accelerates. She has to peer beneath the sun visor to see the road; the bleeding sun is so low in the sky it seems as though the ambulance is hurrying to drive into it, Daniella right behind.

Well, Daddy, Daniella thinks, Your precious Danny isn't going to scare that easily. Girls do have courage, too. "And I have you, don't I, Boy!" she calls. "You be careful back there!" Boy is looking

behind the van, as though to make sure there are no ambulance chasers approaching. Follow Boy's glance, and you'll see only billowing dust on the van's trail. Now look with Boy toward the ambulance. Already, it is lost in a receding cloud of dust, its siren silent again.

Look to the roadside, ahead of the van. A sign:

ECHO RIVER
2 Miles
Narrow Bridge

Movement intrudes on Cyrus's thoughts. His dry eyes focus. Far ahead is a reddish metallic glint; an ambulance barreling toward him, spewing dust. Cyrus takes a deep breath, and shifts his position, and regrips the wheel. His hands are numb, battered by the passage down the road. He watches the vehicle's rapid approach.

The sleeve caresses the scythe handle. The handle is smooth and firm. It is a good scythe. Edna always told Cyrus that quality is better than a bargain that won't last half as long. Cyrus bought the scythe two years ago. Three months ago, he took the scythe into town so Claude could clean and sharpen the blade. When he was done, Claude told Cyrus he'd picked himself a right good piece of equipment, this scythe. Claude closes up shop just after nightfall. The accelerator creaks as it is pressured.

The scythe blade smiles crookedly, curling toward the ambulance.

Cyrus lets his eyes and mind wander again. He knows he should roll shut his window before the ambulance passes, or he will get a cab full of road dust. He doesn't reach for the window handle. He distantly perceives the ambulance, closer, now almost upon him; and his mummy hands grasp the wheel as though to turn the pickup sharply into the other lane. . . .

Then the scream of the siren startles Cyrus out of his reverie, and the ambulance tries to swerve, but too late, too late, the scythe grins and slashes through the ambulance's side view mirror, a spray of glass glints in the red sunlight, and the blade rips a gash the length of the body, sparks screeching behind like a comet's tail. The siren shrieks, tires squeal. The scythe's handle strains, the crates crack and shift . . . but they hold; the handle jams in even more forcefully as the ambulance howls past like a wounded beast. It is a good scythe.

Cyrus feels the jolt, has to fight to keep his pickup on the road.

The siren doesn't stop screaming, drowning out everything but fear. There is a rush of dust and Cyrus gags, coughs, blinks hard to clear his eyes. "What the hell wrong with you!" But already the ambulance is well back, struggling onto the road, and slowing as though considering something, glaring at the pickup with its tail-lights . . . then it drives on, gathering speed.

The scythe, its blade flecked with white paint, does not look back.

Nor does Cyrus. He is fighting for breath, and reaches to wipe the dusty tears from his eyes. The bandages are rough against his face. He looks at the mummy hand, as though it's not his, as though he wants to discard it as he did the mirrors. As he wants to discard the crates and the memories they contain.

Cyrus strikes the steering wheel. Left hand, right hand; again and again, despite the protests of pain. His cry is heavy with disorientation and regret. Town. He must get to town. Unload those damnable crates, unfurl the bandages from his hands; and he curses at the ambulance once more, the second person this day to have done so. Purposefully, he flicks on the pickup's headlights, and speeds up. At the limit of his vision is the bridge over Echo River.

Daniella sees the distant lights blink on. At the edge of her hearing is the scream of the siren. Squinting into the dying sun, she had seen the explosion of dust up ahead a moment ago. She swallows, turns the radio down. She turns on the van's lights.

"We'll be stopping pretty soon, Boy! Sightsee while you can!" Maybe we can make the next town before too late, Daniella thinks. That car up there—no, it's a pickup—might have come from some nearby town.

Ahead is the bridge straddling Echo River. Even this far away, Daniella can see that the sign was right. She and that pickup will be elbowing each other for space. Remembering the encounter between the pickup and the ambulance, she considers pulling over and waiting for the pickup to pass. But no. It's another test, she tells herself; I won't give Daddy the satisfaction. She maintains her speed.

"Look, Boy—a bridge! Maybe this river's big enough to swim in, too!" An afterthought: "Hey, Boy! You might think about coming inside! Boy?" But Boy seems to know he will be spending another night cramped among the boxes and Daniella. He wants these precious moments of freedom. He barks, and feels the wind sweep the sound away.

The scythe seems to set itself. The sleeve flutters in anticipation. Dark thoughts coax Cyrus. The narrow bridge; a speeding van; a twist of the wheel. And he won't have to feel the pain any more. But even as he feels the bump of the pickup powering onto the bridge, he pulls as far wide as he can to give the van room. Catch the confusion in his eyes as he notices a strange sharp shadow reaching ahead of his pickup, in the last rays of sunlight.

Daniella hugs her van to the concrete barrier as she speeds onto the bridge. Below, the river is still, waiting. Behind, Boy is enjoying the sensation of his tongue slapping his cheek. Daniella is looking at the pickup; her face pulls together in concern and she tries to ignore the last glare of the sun, and she sees that it's going to be a snug fit, her van and that pickup, and she opens her mouth to tell Boy to watch his head—

—and Cyrus knows he can't give the van any more room, and his mind toys with what the sharp shadow might be as he starts to slow down—

—she sees it, a crimson glint gives the scythe away, and she hears Boy bark happily, her eyes bulge—

—as Cyrus identifies the shadow, and sees the terror in the girl's face, as her mouth—

—springs wide to scream "Look out!" but she knows there is no time, nowhere to turn, no time—

—to brake, but Cyrus tries, screaming too, the shadow from his pickup stabs toward the shadow from the dog's head—

—a cloud of hissing dust, a squeal of brakes—

—Boy's head turns toward the screams, he barks and senses the rush of the eager blade toward him toward them toward us screeching screaming red glint wind gasp bark blur—

—and Daniella throws open her door, the scythe blade cleaves through the open window and slashes into the metal jamb with a sharp thunk, gouging deep but the jamb is thick enough, it holds, it holds—

—but the scythe handle is yanked free, it whips around, slamming into the side of the van—

—his pickup is careening, Cyrus wrestles with the wheel—

—spins in her hands, but Daniella keeps her van off the barrier, screams "Boy! Boy!" but no answer and the scythe blade grins chip-toothed at her, there is no answer but the howling wind—

—Cyrus loses control, dust everywhere, a grating as his pickup

rasps along the barrier, a piercing as his tires argue, his pickup lurches off the bridge on two wheels—

—“Boy! Boy!” but her hands are full keeping her van from plowing through the other barrier; somehow she forces the van safely off the bridge, slams on the brakes—

—and just as his pickup is about to go into a roll, the crates tumble out and the pickup rights itself, coming down hard in the dirt, a flurry of dirt, and Cyrus brakes, shouting and crying, the seat belt digs into his groin. . . .

And amid the chaos of noise and dirt and shock, his pickup grinds to a halt. The chaos reverberates in his brain. Cyrus sits stunned; his heart races, trying to outpace the engine, as he slumps over the wheel. . . . And in that moment, he hears something. Something that’s not his breath, wild and elusive. Not the dirt, raining against the pickup with a gritty shushing. Not the crates, some of them still flipping end over end. . . .

A dog, barking.

“Boy! Oh thank God, Boy, Boy!” And he is all over her, licking and nuzzling and wagging, and she nearly strangles him, holds him close, and her words are unintelligible—

—when she thinks of the pickup.

“Boy! Off me!” She throws open the door, leaning away suddenly from the blade holding deep in the metal jamb. Carefully she gets out. The scythe handle swings to let her pass.

Through the settling dust she looks back, to the bridge. She runs to it, favoring her left leg and peering into the violet dusk, Boy right behind her.

Cyrus is standing, shakily, on the other side. Looking back, toward her.

Before they run toward each other, Daniella and Cyrus call, simultaneously: “Are you all right?”

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress

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The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Death of a Poet

by Doug Allyn

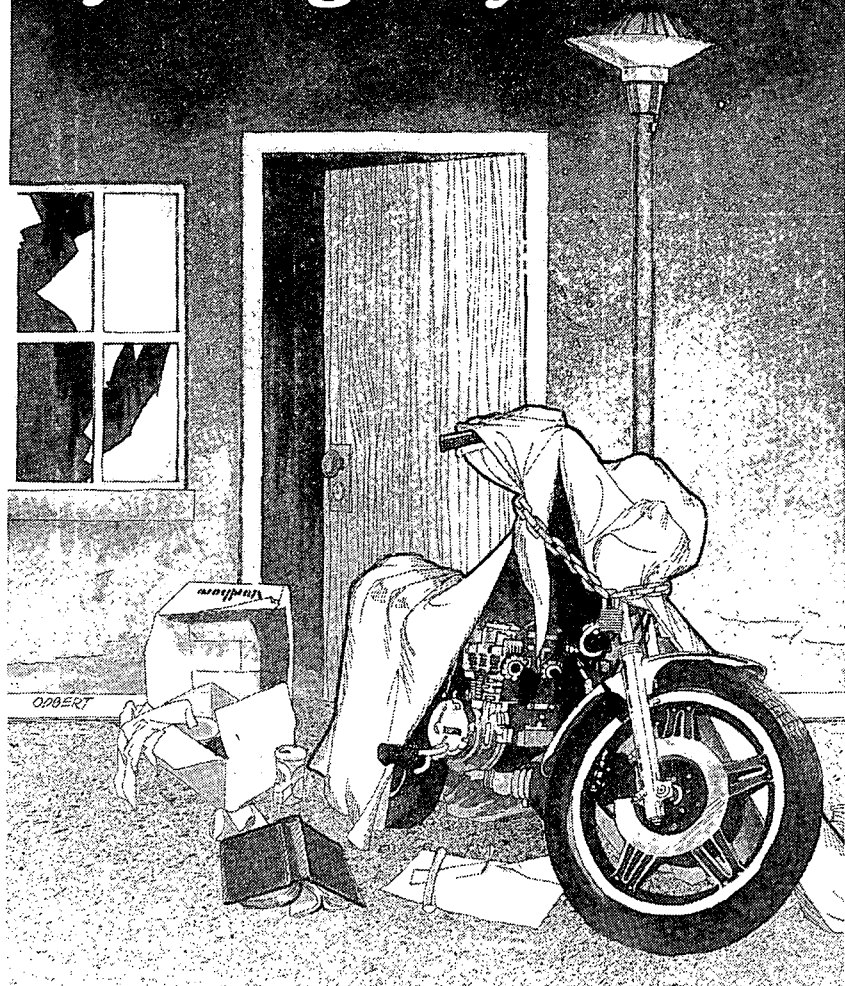


Illustration by Jim Odbert

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It was a strange place for an unveiling. The sheet-draped form was sitting upright on the ice eighty yards from the American shore of the Detroit River. It was easily visible from Jefferson Avenue, which meant that roughly fifty thousand commuters had driven past it without bothering to give us a call. Maybe they thought the guy was sunning himself. In the middle of the river. In January.

I recognized two of the men standing around the body. Charlie Skowron was the deputy coroner, tall, bird-faced, watery grey eyes behind thick horn rims and an unlit White Owl cigar clamped in the corner of his mouth. His assistant, a chubby black kid wearing a fur-lined parka, was stamping around trying to keep warm. The others, two city cops in blue winter uniforms and a paramedic, weren't familiar to me. The look on their faces was, though, tight and wary. They were eyeing my partner with frank curiosity as we crunched toward them across the uneven icefield, wondering how she'd react to whatever was under the sheet. I didn't blame them. I was wondering, too.

"Garcia," Skowron nodded, "nice you could drop by."

"Sorry if we held you up, Charlie," I said. "We were on our breakfast break, had to

wait for the champagne to breathe. What have you got here?"

"A weird one," Skowron said. "Who's your friend?"

"Charlie Skowron, this is my new partner, Sergeant LaVonne Watts." They exchanged nods.

"Look, miss," Skowron said, "if you're new to Homicide you'd probably better—"

LaVonne brushed past him and carefully lifted the sheet off the body. One of the patrolmen looked away, but LaVonne didn't. Her dark eyes narrowed, she pursed her lips, and that was it. A gust of wind whistled across the frozen river from the Canadian side and tugged gently at the sheet. LaVonne tossed it casually aside on the ice. Skowron was right. A weird one.

The corpse was seated in a heavy wooden captain's chair, his ankles lashed to the chair legs with ordinary clothesline, his wrists handcuffed between the spindles of the seat back. He was a big man, dressed in greasy denims, a faded black T-shirt, and engineer's boots. He'd been savagely beaten, his face was a swollen mass of bruises and crusted blood. His chest had been torn open by a shotgun blast. His T-shirt was scorched and shredded around the wound.

LaVonne circled the body

slowly, her face expressionless. She leaned over him to take a closer look at his tattooed arms, then knelt and examined his boots. She pulled off her right glove and ran her finger under the bootsoles. Even the young cop who'd looked away was watching her now, and so was I. She was wearing a powder blue peacoat and jeans, and a bright yellow ski cap with a tasseled top. She could've passed for one of Santa's little helpers. If any of them were black, stocky, and definitely female.

"Well, sergeant," I said at last.

"He's a biker," she said coolly, "or at least he's got steel skid plates on his boots. From his age and some of the tattoos I'd guess he's a Vietnam vet, too. He's got a few needle tracks on his forearms, but not enough for a junkie. If your bikers are into the same stuff ours are, he was probably shooting speed occasionally. Nothing heavy."

"You're not from Detroit?" Skowron asked.

"Nope," she said, "I'm from sunny Tucson, which means I don't know squat about ice. Could a vehicle get out here without leaving tracks?"

"No," Skowron said, "he was carried out here."

"Pretty good trick," LaVonne said, glancing back at the shoreline. "It's a long hike, and

he must weigh, what, well over two hundred pounds. Have you determined the cause of death?"

"Suicide," Skowron said.

She stared at him a moment, then shrugged. "Sure, the guy's been beaten, stabbed, and shot. Worst case of suicide you ever saw, right? Har har. Spare me the jokes, Skowron, there's nothing funny about this."

"You're right," Charlie sighed, "there isn't. Sorry. He was killed by a shotgun fired at close range, but he was already dying from the beating when it happened. I'd estimate time of death around midnight last night, give or take an hour or so. And you missed something, sergeant. Take another look at his forehead."

LaVonne frowned and leaned over the body. I stepped in to get a closer look myself.

"You mean this depression here along the hairline?" she said, tracing the curve of the victim's temple with her fingertip.

"It's a metal plate," Skowron said, "a good-sized one, and if you look along the jawline you'll see some scarring. I'd guess this guy had half his face blown off in 'Nam, and had extensive plastic surgery afterward to repair it. He was no beauty even before he got worked over."

"Most of the tattoos are standard stuff," LaVonne said,

"but a couple are new to me. What are these S-shaped lightning bolts? Some kind of Nazi insignia?"

"Maybe in Tucson," I said. "In Motown it's the logo of the Satan's Sons, an outlaw motorcycle gang. Serious bad guys."

"Serious enough to do this?"

"Absolutely," I said, "although I don't know why they'd grease one of their own and then leave him out on the ice like this. There's open water a little farther downriver. Whoever did this guy in could just as easily have tied a cement block to his chair, chucked him into the river, and saved us a lot of paperwork."

"What about this tattoo?" she said, indicating the one on his shoulder. "It looks like a snake biting somebody's foot."

"Beats me," I said. "I've never seen one like it either. What's written beneath it?"

"M-o-n-t-r-e-s-o-r," she spelled aloud. "Montresor? Mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing," I said, "but it's fresh. There's still some edema around it, and you can see the SS through it if you look closely. He had this one inked on over his gang tattoo."

"Would that be enough to get him killed?"

"I doubt it. He's still got the SS on his other arm, but with bikers you can't be sure about

anything. Have you got all your pictures, Charlie?"

"Sure," Skowron said, flipping his overcoat collar up against the wind, "we had plenty of time while we waited for you two. You can play with him if you want."

I examined the handcuffs first. They were surplus store cheapos, but apparently effective enough. I carefully slid his wallet out of the hip pocket of his greasy jeans, holding it by the edges. "His money's gone, if he had any. Current Michigan driver's license with a motorcycle endorsement. His name is—Kevin Sean Kelly, address in Highland Park. It might be current too, the license was issued recently. And you're right, Skow, his face looks badly scarred in his I.D. photo. Would you call this in for me?" I said to the younger of the two patrolmen. "Ask for wants, warrants, and priors, and take notes, okay?"

He glanced at his partner for confirmation, then set out at a cautious lope across the icefield toward the shore.

"Sears credit card," I continued, riffling through the wallet. "Social insecurity card, and . . . a student I.D. card for Wayne State University, also current."

"Hey, I got it," Skowron said, "this guy looks like your typical

Joe College. This case is probably just a fraternity hazing that got a little out of hand."

"Could be," I agreed, "boys will be boys."

"You've got that last part right at least," LaVonne sighed.

"The guy had three drunk and disorderly convictions during the past four years," LaVonne said, glancing through the patrolman's notes as I threaded our unmarked city Chevy through a grubby, snow-choked back street a few blocks off Woodward Avenue. "He also had a half-dozen traffic citations in that same period, all minor stuff. Prior to that, not a thing. Zip."

"Which means he probably drifted into town roughly four years ago," I said.

"Maybe. Or if Skowron was right about the scars, maybe he wasn't released from the V.A. hospital until then," LaVonne offered.

"Could be," I conceded. "Probably a moot point now, though." I swung the Chevy into the rutted driveway of a rundown motel with a dozen cinder block cabins, each painted a different faded pastel color, all of them peeling. A crudely lettered sign in the office window read: RAINBOW MTR. COURT, RMS BY WK. The blinds were

drawn, no sign of life in the office or any of the cabins. A tarpaulin-draped motorcycle was chained to a lamppost in front of the last cabin in the row. I eased the Chevy into the parking slot beside the bike. The tarp had been slashed, and the bike's gas tank and mufflers were missing.

"The door's ajar," LaVonne said quietly, "who's going first?"

"My turn this time," I said, "you can—" She swung her door open and dropped into a combat crouch behind it, covering the cabin with the snub-nosed .38 she'd pulled out of her purse as neatly as I'd ever seen it done.

"—back me up," I finished lamely. I climbed out of the car and slid along the cabin wall, holding my .38 Smith shoulder high. I nudged the door open with my foot and risked a quick look.

Chaos.

I pushed the door the rest of the way open. The cabin was a single room with the bath in one corner, a small kitchen area in the other. It was empty. And it looked like a pack of orangutans had thrown a beer bust in it.

I motioned to LaVonne to follow and stepped gingerly into the mess. It was a complete shambles. The wallboards had been kicked in, the furniture had been ripped to pieces. Even

the wall sockets were torn out. An explosion couldn't have done any more damage.

"My, my," LaVonne said softly, "offhand, I'd guess somebody was looking for something."

"And probably didn't find it," I said.

"Not unless it was in the last square inch they wrecked," she agreed. "What do you think's going on here? A gang war? Drugs, maybe?"

"A gang war's unlikely. There are a lot of biker gangs in Detroit, but the Sons have been top dogs for a while and they're a rough bunch. I can't see another gang taking them on, although with bikers who knows. The killing's all wrong for bikers, though. They usually just blow each other away and split. Whoever killed Kelly took their time, either for the fun of it or because they wanted something from him."

"Which they didn't get." LaVonne stepped carefully through the debris to the kitchen area and retrieved the shattered remains of a clock from the wreckage. "This was smashed at three twenty," she said, "so either they tore this place apart yesterday afternoon in broad daylight, or they did it early this morning after they wasted Kelly."

"They?" I said.

"Come on, Garcia, it must be a gang of some kind. No one guy made this mess, and it took at least three people to carry Kelly out on that ice. So how many gangs have you got in this town?"

"All of 'em. Dopers, bikers, tongs, the mob, you name it, we got it. The problem is, they've each got their own style when it comes to murder, and this one doesn't fit any of them. Beating him like that, then leaving him on the ice with his I.D. on him. I think somebody used him to send a message, a warning maybe."

"To his gang, you mean?"

"Sending that kind of a message to the Satan's Sons would be like poking a lion in the eye with your finger. You'd have to be absolutely nuts."

"I'd say whoever did this probably qualifies," she said, surveying the wreckage. "I wonder if the message got through?"

"I don't know," I sighed, "but I suppose we should ask."

"It doesn't look like much," LaVonne sniffed as we pulled up across the street from a ramshackle house in a dead-end residential section of Highland Park. The place was two stories tall, sided with battered gray asbestos shingles. A

half dozen motorcycles were parked in the front yard. The houses on both sides were abandoned. One had been gutted by fire. "These guys can't be doing all that well. The Hell's Angels live a lot better."

"It's not because the Sons aren't trying," I said. "They're into grand theft, mostly bikes, they deal guns and speed in wholesale lots, and I've heard they've been supplying muscle and couriers for a Colombian mob dealing coke. They hold the junk while the Colombians do the business someplace else, and, ah, speaking of someplace else, don't take this the wrong way, but I want you to wait in the car while I talk to 'em. If I need backup—"

"I can't back you up from here. What are you gonna do if things go wrong? Holler out the door? If you want backup from out here, call a black-and-white. Partners go together."

"I can talk to these guys alone," I said. "I know a few of them. If you come, there's gonna be trouble."

"Afraid I won't hold up my end?"

"No, but I'd just as soon avoid it if we can, there's—"

"Look, Garcia, I'll spell it out for you. I didn't ask to be transferred here. I was doing undercover work for the Organized Crime Task Force, somebody took a shot at me, and my boss

used that as an excuse to send me up here to Siberia. 'Until things cool off,' he said, but that was crap. He thinks women on the force are fine, as meter maids or typists, just so we stay in our place. Well, I don't figure on retiring sergeant after twenty-five. I'll do the best job I can for you people, but I won't sit in the back of the bus, and I won't wait in the damn car."

"You going to sing 'We Shall Overcome' at my funeral, Sergeant Watts?"

"Maybe. If there's nothing good on TV."

"Terrific," I said.

The front door swung open a crack as we climbed the steps. "That's far enough. Whaddya want?"

"Police," I said, flashing my bronze, "is Nick Kraniak still in charge here?"

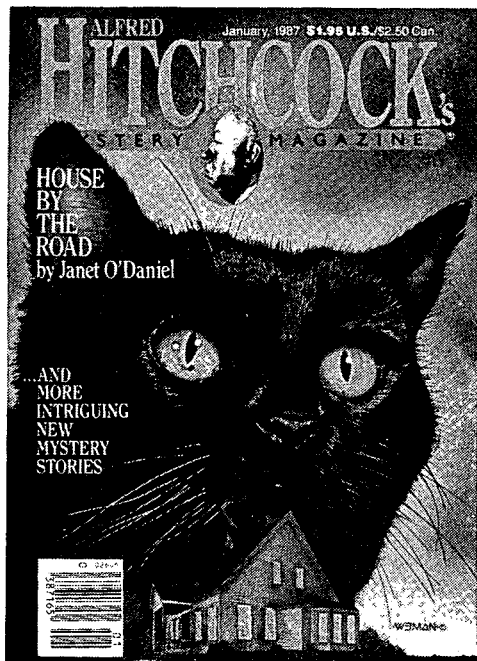
"I'm still here, Garcia, you got a warrant?" The door swung open a little wider, but the man behind it stayed well back in the shadows. He was small and wiry, hawk-faced and hard-eyed, wearing a faded denim vest and jeans.

"It's nothing like that, Nick, I've got news. Come on out. We'll talk."

"I don't think so," Kraniak said. "You come in."

"Fine," I agreed, "whatever you say."

The door opened into a hall-



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way. A redbearded, leather-clad giant with a shotgun was standing beside the window next to it, eyeing the street. Four more men were near the windows in the living room, all armed. A chorus of whistles and howls erupted when LaVonne stepped through the doorway.

"Hey!" Redbeard shouted, "anybody send out for soul food? Your lunch just walked in."

"Nick," I sighed, "is there someplace we can talk? Someplace quieter, maybe?"

"Back here," Kraniak said curtly.

We followed him down the narrow hallway to the kitchen. It was as dimly lit and grubby as the rest of the place, with greasy cupboards and peeling wallpaper. A scarred trestle table stood in the corner surrounded by a mongrel collection of wooden chairs. No captain's chairs, though. A rangy woman with badly bleached hair was idly stirring a pot at the stove. An SS tattoo showed darkly on her pallid arm below the sleeve of her black T-shirt. She had a welt on her jaw and one eye was swollen nearly closed.

"Coffee smells good," I said, easing down on a rickety chair.

"This ain't happy hour and you ain't stayin'," Kraniak said, taking a seat opposite me across the table. "What do you want?"

LaVonne watched from the

doorway for a moment, but when Redbeard moved up behind her, she pulled up a chair at the end of the table. The giant parked his shotgun against the wall and sat next to her, leering openly. She ignored him.

"I've got bad news, Nick," I said, "your membership's shrunk by one, but I get the feeling you already know that."

"You mean Crazy Kevin? Yeah, we heard."

"Oh? How did you hear?"

"Hell, stuck out where he was, half the people cruisin' Jefferson seen him. That all you wanted?"

"Nope. We're wondering what you're going to do about it."

"Do?" Kraniak said, "why do anything? So he got himself killed. So what? He ain't a member here anyway."

"No? Since when?" I noticed LaVonne squirming. Redbeard's left hand had disappeared below the table.

"A while. Week, ten days maybe," Kraniak said.

"Why did he quit?"

"He didn't," Kraniak said, "we run him off. He was gettin' too crazy even for us, you know? I think goin' to school was messin' his head. Always quotin' poetry and crap. And his fits was getting worse, so—"

"What do you mean, fits?"

"I mean *fits*," Kraniak said, "you know, fallin' down, foam'in'

at the mouth and like that. It was funny for a while, but it was gettin' to be a drag. This last one, he was readin' outta some goddam book at Annie over there—" he jerked a thumb at the woman—"callin' her Annabel or somethin'. Lester Molester got bent outta shape about it'n decked 'im, and Kevin started frothin' and kickin' around all over while I'm tryna eat. So I says that's it, he's out. Had the boys put the boots to 'im and throw his ass out in the back yard."

"'Course we redone his originals first," Redbeard grinned, "in fact we done him all over."

"Right," Kraniak nodded, "too bad he didn't freeze to the ground out there. Save somebody the trouble a wastin' him."

"Still," I said, "maybe whoever killed him didn't know he wasn't a member any more. Maybe they thought they were killing one of your people."

"Maybe. Who you got in mind?"

"You tell me. The Disciples? The Wheels? Or maybe your Colombian buddies."

"I don't know what you're—" He was cut off by the sound of LaVonne's slamming Redbeard's palm flat on the table. Her fist was clamped around his little finger, holding it up-right.

"Okay, clown," she said

evenly, "now you just sit tight. Move and I'll break your finger. Move after that and I'll tear it off. Sorry, gentlemen. You were saying, Mr. Kraniak?"

"Let go my finger, bitch," Red snarled, "or—"

There was an audible pop. Redbeard paled, his mouth open in shock. LaVonne's fist still kept his hand pinned to the table.

"I, ah, think we'll be going now, Nick," I said hastily, rising, "unless you want to file brutality charges against my partner here. I'll be a witness if you like."

"Sure," Kraniak said, "that'd look great in the papers, wouldn't it. Go on, get outta here, Garcia."

"Nick, you can't just let 'em walk," Redbeard pleaded, "she—"

Without warning, Kraniak came out of his chair and threw a punch that caught Redbeard flush on the jaw, spinning him to the floor. "You moron!" he roared, "messin' with the heat at a time like this! I oughtta kick your brains in!"

We could hear them shouting all the way back to the car.

"Go ahead, say it," LaVonne said. "If I'd waited in the car it wouldn't have happened."

"Don't worry about it," I said, swerving the Chevy hard to the right to pass a UPS van, "maybe the guy'll learn some manners. Did you see Kraniak's face when I mentioned the Colombians?"

"I'm afraid I was distracted at the time. Why?"

"He flinched. The guy's a psychopath. This is the fourth time I've questioned him about a homicide and I've never seen him show any emotion at all before. Nothing. Maybe fear is too strong a word for it, but I'd say Kraniak's definitely concerned about something."

"The place was like a fortress," she said thoughtfully, peeling off her ski cap and running her fingers through her closely cropped black curls. "They're obviously expecting trouble. From the Colombian mob?"

"Maybe, but if Kelly was a message from this particular Colombian mob, they've changed their style. They usually use machetes, and drop off the body in a half dozen garbage bags."

"My God," she said quietly, "nice little town you've got here."

"Some people like it," I said. "Is it so different from Tucson?"

"Yeah," she sighed, "for one thing it's a helluva lot colder. Where are we going anyway?"

"To school," I said. "Kelly was a student at Wayne State.

I think we should check his report card."

"We should never have admitted him in the first place," Professor Hildebrand said quietly. "I realized that during his first scheduling conference. It was obvious he'd suffered brain damage during the war. I was sure he wouldn't be able to cut it here academically, and he didn't. A very sad case." His empty briar pipe made a rattling sound as he sucked on it. He was a short, fleshy man with thinning, baby-fine blond hair worn long, a pudgy face and pouting mouth. He was wearing a heavy gray sweater, shawl-collared and flecked with pipe ash. He looked like an over-the-hill hippie. His office was lined with books, but otherwise was as bland and impersonal as an optometrist's waiting room. No pictures, no trophies, no mementoes. Nada.

"Why did the university admit him if you didn't think he'd make it?" LaVonne asked.

"It would have been bad form not to. He wasn't a freshman, you see. Kevin completed several semesters here in the early seventies and his grades were excellent then. English major, and a very promising student. Had some poetry published in

several national literary magazines."

"The guy was a poet?" LaVonne said, raising an eyebrow.

"I know it might seem hard to believe, but he was at that time. He dropped out of school for personal reasons, went into the army, and then . . . Well, I thought he deserved the chance to try, at least. I was wrong, and believe me I paid for it. Having him in class was an excruciating experience."

"How so?" I asked. "Was he disruptive?"

"Yes, but not purposely. He wanted to learn very badly. I had him in my American Lit class and he worked like a dog, but he simply couldn't retain the material. Except for Poe. He had a passion for Poe's work and he could recite much of it from memory, but I think he'd learned it before he was injured."

"So how was he a problem?"

"It wasn't his fault really. The other students would insert a question or a comment about Poe into a discussion, whether relevant or not, and Kevin would be off, reciting 'Ulalume' or 'Annabel Lee.' Once he'd started he apparently couldn't stop until he'd finished the entire poem. It was an unbearable situation. And he was obviously deteriorating. He had

a—seizure of some sort in the student union a week or so ago. I talked to him afterward, and suggested a leave of absence, diplomatically of course."

"How did he react to that?" I said.

"Actually, I thought he took it quite well. He said he'd be leaving soon anyway, and asked me not to—take any official action. I agreed not to. I knew he'd never pass his finals anyway. He seemed to have resigned himself to the situation. I suppose I was hoping he'd just drop out quietly, simply stop coming to class. But not like this. Not like this."

"Did he indicate in any way that his life might be in danger?" LaVonne asked.

"No. In fact, I feared quite the opposite."

"How do you mean?"

"He seemed very—intense. More in control of himself than he'd been for months. To tell you the truth, I thought he might be considering suicide. I should have contacted the Student Health Center about it, we have stringent guidelines about that sort of thing, but I—didn't. I'm ashamed to admit I was afraid to do so. Kevin was a tragic figure, but he was also unstable, and, ah, physically intimidating."

"You were probably right, professor," I said; "maybe he

was a poet once, but it was a long time ago. Do you have his personal information on file, next of kin, that sort of thing?"

"They'll have it at the registrar's office," Hildebrand said, "but I recall Kevin's mentioning he had no immediate family. I believe he has an aunt, though, in a rest home somewhere. They should have her name on file."

"Her name wouldn't be Montresor by any chance?" LaVonne asked.

"Mont—oh, you mean the tattoo," Hildebrand said, smiling. "No, I think her name was Kelly also."

"You saw the tattoo?" I asked. "The foot being bitten by the snake?"

"Kevin showed it to me when we last talked. He'd just had it done."

"Did he tell you what it meant?"

"It's the coat of arms of the Montresor family. Montresor was a character in one of Poe's short stories, 'The Cask of Amontillado.'"

"Doesn't somebody get bricked up inside a wall in that one?" LaVonne asked.

"Montresor buries his erstwhile friend Fortunato alive in a catacomb as an act of revenge," Hildebrand nodded. "In the story the Montresor family's motto was . . . *Nemo*

me impune lacessit. Roughly translated, it means no one insults me unavenged."

"But why the tattoo?" I asked.

"With Kevin, who knows?" Hildebrand shrugged sadly. "He was a fanatic about Poe, though. He had a particularly fine leather-bound French anthology of Poe's work he often carried with him. It was quite valuable, I suppose."

"French?" I said. "You mean written in French?"

"Oh yes. Kevin was fluent in both French and German. He was a brilliant student once. And he was still so—earnest. If my other students had half his desire, they could rule the world. Or at least get into grad school. And now, if you have no further questions, I must get to my next class. I'll ask my secretary to call the registrar's office and they'll have Kevin's file waiting for you."

"Thank you," I said, rising, "we'd appreciate it."

"Not at all," Hildebrand said, offering his hand, "and if there's anything further I can do, please ask. You're, ah, absolutely certain he was murdered?"

"Why do you ask?" I said.

"It's just that, well, since I suspected he was suicidal and did nothing to prevent it, I, ah, might have a hard time living with myself if . . ."

"Don't worry about it, profes-

sor," LaVonne said dryly. "If he wasn't murdered, then it was the worst case of suicide you ever saw."

"I'm afraid I don't understand—"

"Just a little inside joke," I said. "Thank you for your time."

"I'm not so sure I was joking," LaVonne said thoughtfully as we waited in the hall for the elevator.

"You mean you figure he really committed suicide?"

"Maybe he did, in a way," she insisted. "Look, his world was winding down anyway. He was having epileptic seizures, he was flunking out of school, and then the animals he was running with drove him out. So he gets his tattoo, no insult unavenged, and tried to get even somehow, only it didn't work out and they killed him for it."

"The killing could be their style, all right," I conceded, "it was brutal enough. But why put him out on the ice like that when they knew they'd be suspects? Why not just make him disappear? They aren't stupid, you know, just crude. Besides, Hildebrand threw him out too, in effect, and Kevin apparently didn't take offense."

"But the Sons didn't just throw him out. They redid his originals."

The elevator door shushed

open and we stepped inside.

"The guy you mangled said something about that," I said as the cubicle hummed into motion, "it slipped my mind during the excitement. What was he talking about?"

"Maybe it's different up here, but back home, when an outlaw biker's inducted into a gang, they toss a drunken bash to celebrate, and the high point of the evening's when all the gang members form a ring around the new guy and urinate on his jeans. Those jeans are called his originals, and he has to wear 'em for the next six months without washing 'em. Very classy dudes."

"So while Kevin was having his seizure—"

"Right. While he was on the floor frothing at the mouth, his so-called buddies stomped him, used him for a urinal, and then they threw him out in the snow to freeze to death. Would that be enough of an insult, do you think?"

"Yeah," I said softly, "I guess it would be."

"It was for me," she said grimly, "and when Fatso laughed about it, *that* was when I decided to break his hand."

"Remind me not to tick you off, Sergeant Watts."

"You're safe enough, Garcia. I hardly ever beat up my partners. Even temporary ones."

"That's a comfort," I said, "and by the way, your revenge theory still doesn't explain what Kelly was doing out on the ice."

"You're right. It doesn't. So let's hear your theory."

"I haven't the faintest idea," I said.

"Terrific," she said.

"Hey, Garcia," LaVonne said as we pulled into the parking lot of the Good Samaritan Nursing Home in Grosse Pointe, "have I known you long enough to ask a favor?"

"Six hours is long enough for you to ask," I said, easing the city Chevy into a visitor's slot, "not necessarily to get. What is it?"

"When you, ah, break the news to Kelly's aunt, would you mind doing it alone? I really hate that whole scene, you know?"

"You mean you're willing to wait in the car this time?"

"If you wouldn't mind, I—"

"Yeah, well, I do mind. Fair is fair, Watts, besides, what if the old lady wigs out and attacks me? As you said, you can't back me up from out here."

"Fine," she said, slamming her door open, "we'll both tell her. And while we're here, maybe you can reserve your room."

The rest home was a squat, single story building of old brick, probably built before the first great war to end wars. I could almost taste the odor as soon as we opened the heavy glass door, an earthy mix of human waste and disinfectant, the scent of souls in decay. The halls were narrow, dimly lit, and nearly deserted. A few patients were in view, slumped in wheelchairs or hunched over aluminum walkers, eking out expeditions measured in inches.

The nurse on duty at the reception desk was tall, slim, and black, wearing a white uniform with a brightly patterned red and green sweater draped over her narrow shoulders. A pair of half-moon spectacles was perched on the end of her aquiline nose. She seemed as slender and resilient as a willow. Her nametag read Mrs. Huston.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, "visiting hours end at four."

"Police," I said, showing her my shield, "this is Sergeant Watts, and I'm Garcia. Do you have a Bridget Kelly here?"

"Why?" Huston asked, smiling. "Has she been out robbing banks again?"

"Nothing like that," I said, "but ah—"

"It's about Kevin, isn't it?" she said, her smile fading. "Is he dead?"

"You know him?" LaVonne asked.

"He's a regular here, three or four days a week. And you didn't answer my question."

"Mr. Kelly is no longer with us," I said. "Why did you ask?"

"Motorcycles," she said bitterly, "we have four residents who've been totally incapacitated on the damned things. And with Kevin's condition . . ."

"What condition?"

"Epilepsy," she said, surprised, "caused by his head injuries. He had a *grand mal* seizure here a few weeks ago. He said it was his first, but I knew better. Damn. Do you have to tell her?"

"She's apparently his only living relative," I said, "she has a right to know. Pretty far gone is she?"

"Not at all, although she may be after this. He wasn't much, but he was all she had. Well, come on, we may as well get this over with."

We followed her down the narrow hallway. She paused now and again to speak to a patient, a smile, a touch. A few of them answered her smile, or nodded, but most seemed unaware of her, or themselves.

She rapped lightly on a partially open door. "Bridget? Are you decent? Company."

The room was small and sterile, a cage for the tiny bird of

a woman sitting up in the bed with a pastel yellow shawl wrapped around her thin shoulders. She was hunched and twisted with arthritis, and she had difficulty turning toward us. Her seamed face, haloed by wisps of silver gossamer, seemed bright and alert, but her eyes were opaque, with lenses the color of smoke. Her head swiveled slowly back and forth like a damaged radar screen, following our movements by the sound of our footsteps.

"Hello," she said uncertainly, "are you friends of Kevin's, then?"

"We've, ah, met him," I said, "but—"

"Is he all right?"

"No, ma'am," I said gently, "I'm afraid he's not." Huston hunched her shoulders beneath her sweater and turned away.

"He's had an accident," I said.

"I see," the woman in the bed said, her sightless eyes seeking the source of my voice, her expression wavering between hope and despair. "Is he bad hurt?"

"Well—" I glanced at LaVonne and the nurse for support but neither woman would meet my eyes. "No, he's, ah, not hurt too badly. He—fell. On his motorcycle. And reopened one of the wounds he got in the army. You knew he was injured before, in the war?"

"Yes, I knew that."

"Well, he—had to go back to the veterans' hospital in Ann Arbor. He was afraid you might worry, so he asked us to stop and see you." LaVonne's eyebrows arched toward the ceiling.

"Will he be there long, do you think?" Bridget asked. "Can I talk to him?"

"I'm afraid not," I said swallowing, "at least not for a while. He's had a head injury, you see, so he won't be able to use the phone for quite some time, but we'll keep you posted on how he's doing, of course. Are, um, these his books on the nightstand here?" I said, trying desperately for a change of subject.

"Yes, he reads to me sometimes. He has a beautiful voice. Like his father's. I'll miss that."

"Well, ah—" LaVonne and Huston were staring at me, grimly expectant—"maybe I can fill in for him sometimes. If you wouldn't mind, of course."

"That would be . . . nice," Bridget said, sagging back to her pillows. "I'd like that very much."

"I think we've had enough excitement for one visit," Huston said briskly, "and I need to confer with Mr. Garcia here about our visiting schedule. You get some rest now, Bridget. I'll be in to see you in a bit."

"All right," the old woman

sighed, "goodbye, Mr. Garcia. And thank you for bringing me the news."

"No problem," I said. "I'll, ah, see you soon."

"Great work, sarge," LaVonne said, as Huston closed the door softly behind us. "By the numbers, right down the line."

"I didn't notice you jumping in to help," I said, "or you either," I added as the nurse joined us.

"Maybe you didn't make a total botch of it," Huston said, "as long as you don't just walk away now. Kevin's been coming Tuesday and Thursday evenings. It would probably be best to be—consistent about that."

"Terrific," I sighed, "why not?"

"He came at night?" LaVonne asked. "I thought you said visiting hours ended at four."

"We do have evening hours from seven to nine," Huston said, "but to tell you the truth, we stretched things a little for Kevin. He usually came a lot later than that."

"You weren't worried about having him in here at night?"

"Worried? No, you learn to judge people in this business. Kevin was a little crazy, but he wasn't violent, or at least he wasn't around here. The only time I worried about him was

when he was in Bailey's room."
"Bailey?" I said.

The body suspended above the bed by a network of webbed straps attached to a steel frame was barely recognizable as human. His face was a patchwork of bandages and plastic tubes that were plugged into the openings where his nose and mouth had been, and into an arm and his groin. They connected him to a desk-size console that hummed and clicked quietly in the twilit cubicle.

"I'm afraid he won't be able to answer any questions," Huston said dryly.

"No," I said, "I suppose not. Is he conscious at all?"

"It's possible he has moments of awareness, he's not brain-dead, but he doesn't respond to anything except discomfort really."

"But you say that Kevin read to him?"

"Sometimes," she nodded, "from one of the books on the nightstand there. And sometimes he'd just sit with him and talk. They were in the Vet's Facility in Ann Arbor together for a while. Kevin recovered, but Bailey..." She shook her head slowly.

"Why is he hanging from that rack like that?" LaVonne asked.

"Ulceration. He's been bed-ridden since—1972, I believe,

and his circulation's poor. Staph infections are quite common in cases like his. It may be what kills him, eventually."

"And all this —paraphernalia?" I said, circling the bed slowly, "this keeps him alive?"

"It feeds him and detoxifies his blood," Huston nodded, "and—watch out!" She lunged forward to catch an I.V. stand I'd brushed against before it toppled to the floor. I stood aside as LaVonne helped her slide it back into place beside the bed. And I committed my first crime of the day. Grand theft.

"Sorry," I said, "I should have been more careful."

"No harm done," Huston said, straightening the tube connected to Bailey's arm.

"I can see why you were worried when Kevin was with him."

"It wasn't Kevin I was worried about," Huston said evenly, "or even Bailey. I was just afraid that Kevin might—do something for Bailey. And that I wouldn't try to stop him. Any more questions, Sergeant Garcia?"

"No," I said, "I guess not."

I fired up the Chevy, let the engine idle, and flicked on the heater to take some of the edge off the chill. "We have to talk," I said quietly, "we have a problem."

"What kind of a problem?"

"This kind." I took the book from under my overcoat and passed it to her. A leather-bound volume. Poe: *Anthologie*.

"You lifted this when you dumped the I.V. unit, didn't you," she said.

"You're very observant, Sergeant Watts. I also copped a peek inside. Take a look."

She flipped the book open. The center had been carved out. A transparent packet of white powder was stuffed inside. LaVonne took a fingernail file from her purse and carefully pierced the bag. She wet the tip of her little finger with her tongue, pressed it into the opening, then tasted the powder that adhered to it.

"Well?" I said.

"Coke," she said coolly, "pure, or close to it." She hefted the bag. "There's roughly half a key here, maybe a quarter of a million dollars' worth." She raised her eyes to mine. They were neutral, unreadable. "The nurse might have been able to identify the book. Why did you lift it?"

"It's more than just half a key," I said, "it's the whole key. It's the reason Kelly was out on the ice."

"I'm listening."

"You were right. Kevin was trying to get revenge. He apparently knew the Sons were

holding a coke shipment for the Colombian mob, so he ripped it off and stashed it. You've seen their clubhouse, there's no way the Sons could come up with enough money to cover the loss. They had to get it back. They hunted Kevin down, tried to beat it out of him, but they overdid it. He was dying. So they finished him off and put him out where he'd be found and identified right away. He was a message all right, to the Colombians. The Sons'd lost the junk, but at least they'd killed the man who stole it."

"Assuming you're right, will the Colombian mob settle for that?"

"No, I don't think they will, and neither does Kraniak. He's expecting big trouble and he's going to get it. The Colombians are every bit as rough as the Sons, and body or no body, they won't just write off a quarter of a million without doing something about it."

"You still haven't said why you walked out with the stash," she said warily.

"Because it's in the wrong place," I sighed. "So far, everything I've told you is guesswork. We can't prove any of it. All we can do at this point is get our names in the paper for scoring some dope, and if we do that, we let the Sons off the hook. The poet died without

telling them where he hid it. I don't think we should tell them for free."

"No? And just what do you plan to do with it?"

"Simple, Sergeant Watts," I said, "I'm going to give it to you, and you're going to give it back to the Satan's Sons."

"What are you talking about?" she said, stiffening.

"Look, the Sons are waiting for the Colombians to clobber 'em for losing the dope, and it's going to happen, and soon. The mob'll probably shoot up the clubhouse for openers, just to show Kraniak they mean business, and when that happens, we'll investigate the shooting. And we'll find this book again. And we'll nail the Sons for Kelly's murder, for possession of controlled substances, and probably for at least a dozen other things we don't even know about yet."

"Plant the evidence, you mean?"

"I'd rather think of it as putting it back where it belongs. That's part of our job, isn't it? Tidying up after the citizens?"

"But why give the stuff to me?"

"Also simple, Sergeant Watts. Because you don't know me well enough to trust me with a quarter of a million bucks' worth of junk, and because you can carry it in your purse a lot eas-

ier than I can carry it under my coat."

"I see," she nodded. "Just one more question, Garcia, suppose I choose not to get involved in your little caper?"

"Then I guess we go straight to the station, turn in the book, and get a pat on the back. And Kelly stays on the record as the worst case of suicide we ever saw."

"Then we'd better head for the station," she said. "I don't want any part of this."

"Fine," I said evenly, "no problem." I slipped the Chevy into drive, and gunned it into the scramble of rush hour traffic on Jefferson. The wan winter sun had slid below the skyline and the street lights were winking on with a sickly amber glow.

"Do you handle cases this way often?" LaVonne said. "By rearranging the evidence, I mean."

"No," I said, "only in special situations."

"What's so special about a biker murder?"

"Nothing, I guess, except that this guy struck me as special. He got his life scrambled fighting in a lost cause. I hate to see him die in another one. Besides, you've got to admit that giving the book to the Sons would be poetic justice, right?"

"I wasn't aware that planting

evidence came under the heading of justice."

"Justice is an ideal," I said, "and ideals live in heaven. We're doing business in Detroit. Sometimes you've got to grease the wheels."

She didn't reply. I swung the Chevy onto Woodward Avenue and headed for the Metro Central station.

"You know, in a way he really did commit suicide," LaVonne said quietly. "In the shape he was in, he must've known he wouldn't get far before they ran him down."

"Maybe," I shrugged. "Who knows what he thought. He was crazy."

"Poets are supposed to be bananas," she said, "it's part of their job. Kelly must have been crazier than most, though. A special kind of crazy."

"How do you mean?"

"Because not only was he nuts himself," she sighed, "I think he was contagious. Look, we're due for a chow break, right? So why don't we grab some Chinese take-out and eat in the car. Maybe park someplace with a view. Like say, down the block from the Satan's Sons clubhouse. Maybe something interesting'll happen. If it doesn't, I guess we can always turn in the book later."

"I'm not too crazy about Chinese," I said.

"Tough," she said, "you picked breakfast."

"Sergeant Watts," I said, "I think this might be the beginning of a beautiful relationship."

"I doubt it," she said. "I really do." But she smiled faintly when she said it. It wasn't much of a smile, and it didn't reach her eyes. But it was a start.

UNSOLVED

by Hubert
Phillips ("Caliban")

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

Berries Island is another island of the group in which differing standards of veracity are maintained by different tribes. The Blacks, Logans, and Rasps are not distinguishable save in this important respect. The Blacks always speak the truth; the Rasps, never; while the Logans speak the truth and lie alternately.

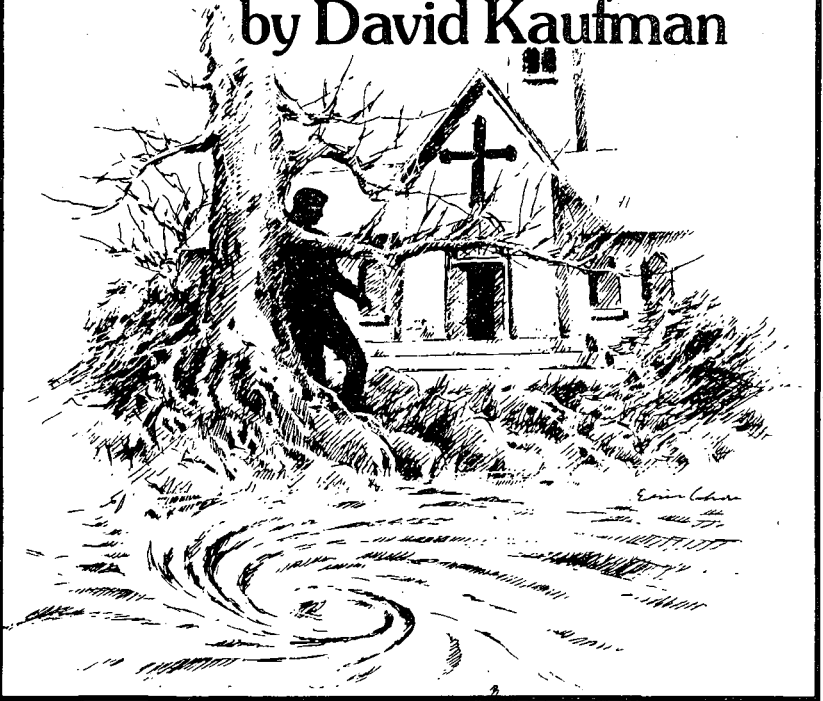
On a recent visit I was taken around by two guides, each of whom asserted that the other was a Logan; but whether either of these statements was true I had, at the time, no means of telling. We called first at the local Sports Club to witness the final throws for the Javelin Cup. The three finalists were said by one guide to be (in the order of their throws) a Black, a Logan, and a Rasp; but by the other to be a Rasp, a Black, and a Logan.

To which tribes did the two guides and the three finalists actually belong?

See page 149 for the solution to the March puzzle.

The Church at Garlock's Bend

by David Kaufman



Above Scranton the Susquehanna is narrower and more winding, and it is far more interesting as it switchbacks its way from the northwest out of New York than is the slower and more stately part of the river to the south. It flows through land that for a highly populated state is sometimes surprisingly primitive, and it is not too difficult, were you to travel its length through the hills of north central Pennsylvania, to come to one of a dozen or more small towns, towns with sometimes only twenty or so houses, with perhaps a store and a church—towns that time

and progress seem to have ignored or forgotten. And the people who live in them or around them, while never overtly unfriendly, for reasons of their own keep to themselves and do not seem to care much for the rest of the world.

Above Skinner's Eddy, Garlock's Bend was such a town. I grew up on a farm just a few miles downstream, and my first memories of it are as lazy and slow as the summer heat in the green hills. It is a ghost town now, just a bunch of tired and worn out buildings, some of them leaning precariously—rotted wood on rotten foundations. But when I was young it was as vital and as prosperous as such a small town so out of the way could possibly be.

It was the river that did it. It was the river and the thing that happened in the river that took the spirit out of the town and caused its people to, I don't know, to just move away—one family, sometimes two families at a time. And then they were all gone. The town was abandoned.

Garlock's Bend was right *on* the river, or on a swell of it (we locals with typical Pennsylvania Dutch enthusiasm actually called it a lake, although it was only just a very wide, slow spot where the river came thrashing out of the tight hills, calming quickly, deepening, and widening), and the church was tight down against the water, shaded and cooled by a stand of large sycamore. They were things to look at from a piece downstream—the trees, the town, the church, and the high hills behind the whole of it. They were things that could make you love Garlock's Bend.

We were one of the first families to move away, and although I am sure we fussed about it, we children were never told why we left. There was some vague talk about my father getting a job down in Harrisburg, but I thought without ever saying it that there was some other reason. In the week or ten days before our departure my parents seemed quite agitated, especially so my father. Often they would stop talking if we came near them, or they would change the subject, talking a little too fast and a little too loudly. And we were in those last few days sternly forbidden to go anywhere near the river.

There was something so urgent in that command that we never questioned it.

Anyway, we left. I would have much preferred to stay in those familiar hills near the friends of all my youth, but I had the fickle, inattentive mind of a youngster, and soon I had some new playmates down in Harrisburg. Bit by bit I came to realize that Gar-

lock's Bend was not the only place in the world. Bit by bit I put it out of my mind.

Now I am a mathematician by profession. In certain narrow circles I am quite well known. And so it was not at all unusual for me to find myself invited to lecture this past summer session at Staunton, a small liberal arts college just a dozen or so miles down river from Garlock's Bend. I would once again, by lucky chance, visit the land of my youth. And while I might never have returned solely to visit my home town, I was happy to avail myself of the chance, now that it seemed so convenient.

Curiously, after I accepted the position, and starting almost at the *moment* I accepted, I began to feel a much stronger urge to return. I quickly came to the point that I could not get Garlock's Bend out of my mind. And as I remembered things long ago childishly dismissed, as I remembered the river, I had strange, concomitant feelings of uneasiness, of unbalance, of distaste even, begin to grow within me. It was, the whole of it, a curious mix of pleasure and displeasure, of delight and dread, and had I known what was in store for me, I would have yielded to these sudden mixed and mostly unhappy feelings and stayed away.

I wish I had.

When you visit Garlock's Bend you drive down out of extremely high hills to the valley below. As the descent begins, you come suddenly out of thick green forest, and the whole of the valley then seems to open up. And you can catch glimpses of the town now and again at overlooks as the narrow road curls downward, vaguely following the churning and thrashing of the rapidly falling river, into the valley far below.

I stopped at several of these overlooks the day I arrived, for pleasure at first because I had not even seen the town in some forty years, and *never* from that vantage point, and then I stopped because I felt myself drawn to the overlooks. It was as if I wanted to take in the whole of the town before I came to it. As if I wanted to revisit at once all of my lost past.

But nothing that I could see from the high hills told me anything but that the town was indeed deserted, decrepit, downfallen. I was overcome with sudden feelings of hopelessness, of sadness, of a strange kind of loneliness. And I was astonished at the intensity of these feelings.

When I had come down out of the hills, I dropped off the main highway onto the old dirt road that crawled along the river, past

thick stands of hemlock and thin scraggly brush, until it came to Garlock's Bend, and then I made my way carefully down the only street of the silent little town. It was like driving backwards into time. I eased my car around the debris that was strewn about haphazardly. It looked as if no one had even *been on Main Street* for years. I parked just opposite the remains of Miller's, Garlock's Bend's only hardware store. The Saturday mornings I had spent there with my father! And now the roof of the front porch had fallen down, and the large picture window was broken. I could hardly see into the building, but it seemed probable to me that looters had taken all they possibly could, and then time and the dust had gotten the better of what was left.

I spent an hour or more just walking the length of that desolate town, peering into any window, any nook or cranny that I might, sudden little insights, little memories pricking at my consciousness, like long forgotten melodies. It was a bittersweet pastime.

Suddenly, there it was. Off ahead of me in the distance, down tight to the edge of the water, the church of all my youth. In every one of my fantasies concerning Garlock's Bend I always came again to the church. It had been the center of so much that I remembered with pleasure.

Soon I was standing down by the water, looking up through the trees at the double doors and the wooden cross just above them. The church somehow seemed new and clean. I remember noting how curious that was, and how small and timid the whole of it made me feel. The only notion I had of sound was the gentle lapping of the river. No other sound. Long years before I had climbed the few steps before the church dozens of times and more. Hundreds of times. And now circumstances had changed me so completely that I marveled at how like an interloper I felt myself to be.

Also, I had a curious sense of whimsy because of the poor condition of the steps. Odd, I thought, that I might go crashing through and break an arm or a leg. The thought made me doubly cautious because had such a thing happened it would have been dreadful—from all that I had seen I was certain there was no one around in all that desolation to rescue me.

I moved carefully through the old building, conscious of the dust, the ubiquitous dust, and the mordant smells of the past. It is curious how smells alone can pull lost memories back into our consciousness with a swiftness that astonishes. The smells of that old church took me quickly and completely.

I soon found myself sitting in the dusty pew that our family had used long ago, and I admit to being almost overcome with nostalgia. I do not know how long I sat there, lost in those memories of my youth. Some tens of minutes, at least.

It was then so quiet I could hear the stillness of the place ringing in my ears. And it seemed to me, lost as I was in all that stillness, that if I really listened, if I really tried to hear, just vaguely and faraway I *could* hear, with pristine clarity, the voices of my folks and my friends of long ago, singing all the old songs. I wanted to weep, as do we all at such times I suspect, for my lost innocence.

How temporal life suddenly seemed to me.

I was brought round rather quickly. I *had* thought myself to be totally alone—in that silent church and in that forgotten town. I never would have dreamed it could be otherwise. But suddenly, from somewhere in the cellar of the church, just beneath me, I distinctly heard a low heavy thud, as if something of extreme weight had just fallen.

A few seconds of utter silence and then I heard the thing slam again, more clearly still. And then once more.

To say that I was startled by that knocking would be something of an understatement. But I remember that at the time I was only slightly frightened.

There are times in our lives when without reason we act foolishly, even irrationally. We do things we could not possibly later explain. *Now* I know how irrational was my next act; *then* it seemed to me to be the most natural thing in the world to do.

At the time my immediate and only thought was that I should go down into the cellar and find the source of the noise. Never mind the fact that I was alone and in a totally isolated place—a place where there could *be* no strange sounds, a place where there could not possibly be anything to *make* such noises.

I quickly found the door to the cellar. It was stuck shut from disuse, but with a series of impatient little jerks I managed to get it open just wide enough to squeak through. I could only imagine how foolish I must look, pulling and fretting at that crepitating door, flustering the dry dust that swirled in the little shafts of sunlight that came through the simple stained glass windows.

There was only silence now from below. Silence so loud as to almost ring in my ears.

The little wooden steps down into the cellar were narrow and badly rotted. I thought again of crashing through steps and there

an end to me. But the thought did not stay with me for long, so determined was I.

"Hello?" I called. "Hello? Is anyone down there?"

How *that* could be was something that did not occur to me to wonder about in my excitement. The floor above was covered with a thin layer of dry gray dust which only I had disturbed. All tracks were mine. I was indeed alone.

Now on the steps I noticed that the dust, which above was powdery and dry, was almost black and was oily or even waxy in texture, from the dampness and decay below the ground level, and the air was musty and stale, as if it had been bottled in for years.

I moved down the stairs carefully. The black dust was everywhere. It almost seemed slippery, and I had no wish to fall.

"Hello?" I called again, and then, as I began to realize how foolish the thought was that I might not be alone, sounds or no sounds, I smiled at my ingenuousness.

The only light in the cellar came from the two small windows at ground level. They were wretchedly dirty, but there was certainly light enough to see by, and quickly I was standing at the bottom of the wooden steps, in a state of excitement now about what I might find, and not a little impressed by my own daring.

The walls of the cellar were everywhere made of cut sandstone. Massive those walls, at least a foot thick (judging from the depth at the little windows), and everywhere gray-red and covered with that same oily black patina. And sweating moisture and dankness and mildew until the whole of the cellar seemed a dismal wet dungeon.

The smell was awful. It was not the healthy acrid smell of age in the room above—this was the musty odor of rotteness and decay. And it seemed to me that the stench got worse and worse as I clambered down the fragile little steps, almost as if it were layered like thicknesses of slate and were denser at the bottom.

I looked carefully around the room, for what I did not know. I began to feel more than a bit uneasy now because of the stench and because I could see nothing that might have caused such knocking as I heard.

I knew, as clearly as I know I am one day to die, that I had heard those noises. But there was nothing very unusual down there, nothing that was not covered with the dust of almost half a century. Nor was there a sign of any disturbance. All was as time and neglect should have made it.

Across the room was just one little table that I could see. It was the only furniture in the whole of the cellar. But it was at least something, so I moved closer.

The table was ordinary and of little note, but beneath it, curiously, rested a wooden hod box that seemed half full of set mortar. A few small hand tools—a sledge, a trowel, a small claw hammer—lay carelessly strewn beside the box, everything long covered with the distasteful dust.

It was on the next wall, and it was the cause of everything.

It was the river wall, actually, fairly close to the table. On this wall was a clumsy bricked-in patch some four feet high by three feet in width. The sandstone blocks were patched in with a facing of ordinary red brick. The thing was quite visible, in spite of coating of the loathsome dust, and so unusual that I felt a very real slash of fear. I flushed coldly when I first saw it.

By this time I was sufficiently off balance from the horrible knocks and nauseated by the pungent smells that I was trembling. I stared at the patch for some time before deciding that I could bring myself to examine it.

I moved closer.

There were some loose bricks and a half empty bag of cement on the floor just to one side, and although the whole area was obscured by the heavy layer of oppressive dust, the patch gave every indication of being a jerry-built job. I could tell easily that the mortar between the bricks was not struck, the floor in the vicinity had apparently not been cleaned after the job was finished, and spilled little piles of mortar and the general cluttered look of the area suggested at best a slipshod piece of work, at worst a job frantically undertaken and frantically finished.

The bricks were recently bulged, as if the patch had almost been burst through, and where the bricks were loosened, the greasy dust was now darker, even more greasy looking, *wet* looking, and it was apparent to me that water was leaking through the bricks.

And then the thing happened that I shall never forget.

At first it was no more than an awareness that came to me, a feeling that something was amiss, that something was not right. I remember it caused me to stop all movement and listen. And then a slight whisper of a noise that grew and grew and became real—a heavy, gurgling sound it was, a kind of grinding or rushing, from behind the wall. It increased and increased in intensity until in terror I tumbled backwards, and then the next thing I

knew I was frantically crayfishing away from the wall.

There was a deafening crash against the patch.

The patch seemed to *give*, several inches at least, in a sudden frightening bulge, the result of the awful smash it endured, and water spurted out from one side, as if the whole of it was about to yield to the heavy force in the water. I lurched backwards crazily, convulsing, arching for air to breathe, until I slammed into the steps. I could not take my eyes from that hideous spurting water. In these few seconds enough had come through the wall to cover the floor. All I could think of now was that it was about to burst its way completely through the weakened patch and engulf me. I was convinced in that second that I really was about to die.

I turned and scrambled up the oily black steps, thrust myself violently at the door and strained to be through it. My lungs and legs ached with pain. I raced the length of the church, almost vaulted the few little steps outside, and stopped, exhausted and nauseated, just short of the river. I grabbed at one of the trees and literally hugged it to keep from falling. I wept from relief. My clothing was covered with black slimy filth from the dust and water. My head was pounding, my flesh crawling.

For some long moments all I could manage was to cling to that tree and just gulp in deep delicious lungfuls of clean, fresh air. How good that was!

With benign indifference, a gust of wind made a deep swirl of a wave on the lake, and then was gone.

Still I clung to the tree. As I came round and began to breathe a bit more easily, I knew that somehow I was free of whatever it was that had made the great and terrible knockings I had heard, that I had heard and even *felt* the power of. I was outside the church, and I was free.

Essentially that is what happened to me the day I went into the church at Garlock's Bend. I have not shortened or embellished the details. All of it is the truth. I saw nothing. There were no ghosties or ghoulies, no hairy antlered monstrosities from God alone knows where, trying to swallow me up or wrench away my immortal soul. I never saw anything.

But all the same I heard the noises. I endured that awful stench. And I saw the wall give.

Something was down there. *Something*.

Still holding onto the tree I began to calm. I grew less frightened. I looked up at the doors to the church, the cross above them, the

motionless branches. All of it appeared so serene and so wholesome. And with the setting sun at the end of the valley and the absolute stillness of the lake, the ghost town of Garlock's Bend seemed to me to be almost innocent.

But I could never again believe that. I *knew*. I knew for certain.

Aching almost as if I had been physically beaten, I limped wearily up Main Street past all the abandoned businesses and homes, this time all but oblivious to the utter and complete desolation of the town. I sat for some minutes in my car, still in something of a daze. Now that I no longer needed adrenaline, it left me and I was suddenly completely exhausted.

And then, in awe of all that had happened, feeling very alone and very old, I eased the car into gear, pulled out onto the pathetic little debris-cluttered street, and left Garlock's Bend forever.

I did go to Staunton. I taught the summer seminar as I had intended. I saw no point in doing otherwise. When I was not teaching I thought a great deal about what had happened to me, about what had caused the awesome noises, about the terrors I felt so thoroughly. Those terrors were replaced with anger, and then in time with a kind of sad acceptance.

I decided to keep my story to myself. I was afraid, I suppose, that no one would believe me. And in the end I had no proof of anything.

Then one day, just a few days short of the end of classes and my proposed return to Pittsburgh, I was sitting in the Oak Grove, enjoying my usual lunch of hard cheese and good bread.

Staunton is a fairly wealthy school, and so the gardens of the Oak Grove are well kept. It is not unusual to see a whole group of workers—pruning, weeding, planting—keeping to their tasks, laughing among themselves, but all the while inevitably working. It is the Pennsylvania Dutch ethic, and it is still typical of the area.

One of the oldest of the crew, however, I had been feeling for several noontimes, had been doing his best to keep his eyes off me, but with little success. Once or twice I caught him in a downright stare, and while he quickly looked away and avoided my glance, it was apparent that he had a deep interest in me. I was more intrigued than irritated.

On this present day he seemed as if he could avoid my company no longer, and at the lunch break he came and sat on the bench just opposite mine, unpacked his bucket very slowly and precisely, and stared at me while he chewed resolutely on what appeared to be a sandwich of Lebanon bologna.

I sensed his exquisite shyness and knew that the first move had to come from me. "Fine afternoon," I tried.

He nodded. And then, with a wry smile, "I think I know you," he said. "I think you must be Eugene Leventry's oldest boy."

I was stunned. "How in the world did you know that?" I cried. "And who are you anyhow?"

"Aach, you wouldn't remember me," he said, his voice thick Pennsylvania Dutch. He shook his head slowly. "You was just a little fella when you left here. You wouldn't know me at all. I'm Amos Myers. I knew your daddy."

"Of course," I cried. "*Of course* I remember you."

"I *knew* you was his boy," he said. He smiled broadly and came and sat by my side. His big paw of a hand almost crushed mine with enthusiasm as we greeted each other.

Then began a conversation that lasted for over an hour. The Pennsylvania Dutch are very orderly and very polite, and so we began by dealing with all the usual pleasantries. I asked of his history and he asked of mine. I learned that his nephew, Aaron Myers, had just frightened the whole family by having a heart attack. He was related by marriage to my second cousin on my father's side, over to Skinner's Eddy, and did I know that he had gone all through college and was an animal doctor? He was coming around, though, and going to live, thank the Good Lord. For my part I revealed to Amos, because he genuinely seemed to want to know, that my parents were both dead, that I was alone, that I had never married.

During all of that I was deciding to abandon my reticence and bring up the subject of Garlock's Bend. Somehow I came to feel as if I had to. Maybe because he knew my father.

"I've been teaching here all summer," I began. "I, uh, I went to Garlock's Bend when I first arrived." I hesitated for just a few moments and then added, "I visited the church."

He stopped working on the sandwich.

"There is something in that church," I said carefully, "that does not like people."

He was quiet for some moments. The muscles in his face seemed to tighten. He put down the sandwich. "You should not have gone there," he said quietly. "That place is shunned."

"I'm sorry," I said. "There is no way I could have known that. I've been away from Garlock's Bend for so many years."

And then it all came out. The whole of it. Soon I could not stop and did not want to stop. I told him about the awesome heavy

knocking, about the hideous odors in that cellar, and I tried to describe for him the terror I felt when I was convinced I was about to die.

"But I never saw anything," I concluded, embarrassed, almost as if apologizing. "I never saw a thing."

The whole of Amos's body came round as he turned stiff-necked to stare at me for at least a minute. He looked very grave. "Never saw anything? No one ever saw anything," he said finally. "No one ever saw *nothing*."

He sat quietly. I could tell that he was deciding whether it was proper. I was essentially a stranger, and that made confiding in me a very large venture for him.

When he began, I thought at first that he sounded unconcerned, as if he were describing something that had affected him only from a distance. As if over the years it had become a sort of fairy tale. Something he took pleasure in telling to worthy strangers, like a soldier might rehearse a battle of little ultimate importance.

I was wrong.

When he had finished retelling it for me, he was weeping, weeping for his lost town and his lost friends, and for much more than that, and I knew that I had someone who understood, far better than I ever could, what was happening and what *had* happened so many years before at Garlock's Bend.

"We knew something was there, though," he began. "We knew it, right enough. Something unreal. We knew it when Joe Michaels was trapped in the lake just a little ways out from Miller's Hardware. Suspended out there like something down under the water had him by the legs and wouldn't let go. He was waist deep in the water, out maybe fifteen feet from shore, and just held there."

Amos was getting into the story now, easing into it as he might put on a glove, and telling it slowly and completely.

"And him yelling out crazy at first and then later babbling like a baby about how he was going to die. About what the thing was doing to him under the water. And why didn't we help him. Whatever it was kept a hold on him for a night and a morning. A Sunday morning." He turned his body again so that he could see me.

"It was mocking us, holding him like that. It was an unholy thing, and I'll never forget it. Old Joe was stuck out in the water, right in the floodlights we had put on him that night and all. He was just held there, like I said. All the men on shore, watching, feeling helpless because we couldn't do nothing. We couldn't save

Joe. We tried, hard. We got nowhere. Then we got to just sitting there, waiting, not even moving hardly. Just staring at him in the water. And him motionless now. And off to the church the women had gone, and they were singing hymns. Singing hymns peaceful like. For Joe, you see. That was a lot of years ago, and I remember it just as clear."

It seemed to me that he was breathing heavier now, and sighing a lot. "Well," he said, and then he stopped. He strained around to look at me again, "I don't suppose that your daddy told you any of this."

I shook my head.

"No, I didn't think so," he said. He was quiet for a long time. "Late in the morning the thing, whatever it was, started to pull him down, and one of the men killed old Joe. Just as it took him under."

His eyes were glistening now with the memory of it, his hands going in hopeless little circles, and I could not help but wonder how his life had been changed, to remember so deeply and mourn so deeply after so many years.

"With a shotgun."

"My God," I said.

"What could we do? Let it take him? It was his best friend that killed him. But any of us would of done it. None of us would of let it get him under the water alive." Amos shrugged. "And then there wasn't even nothing to show that old Joe was ever out there. The water was quiet, and he was gone."

"That's a horrible story," I managed, and somehow I felt more concern for Joe Michaels, gone nearly fifteen years, than for myself and my own tale. "It seems so unfair."

"It's true," he said. "It's a true story."

He was quiet for a few moments. "Well, that just sort of took the heart out of the town. Some people did leave, like I said." He paused. "Your daddy took his family." He managed a smile and reached over and patted my leg gently. "Those who stayed shunned the river. Completely. And no one told anyone outside of Garlock's Bend. That may seem foolish now, but it's the truth. It was sort of like a sickness or a disease we all shared, and didn't want anyone to hear of."

"I don't know what to say."

"Well, that ain't the whole of the story. Not for me, anyways. Not by a long shot. Other things started to happen. And nobody

can be sure, but it seemed like there were some, some tunnels sort of, and the . . . hell, I don't know, the *thing* . . ."

"Ah, look," I said. "You. . ."

"No," he said. "No. I want to tell you. It just sounds so. . ." He took a long breath. Some minutes passed.

I had the curious feeling of being high in the air looking down at the two of us, sitting on that little bench in the sunlight, for all the world like two people in casual conversation. All round us in the Oak Grove students and teachers were walking, talking, full of their own pleasures and problems, oblivious to what we were saying.

"One of the tunnels was in that house up there," he said, pointing, "up on Cedar Hill, and another was downstream in the valley. Bad things happened in those houses."

He pulled out a huge red handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

"Then . . . Then my wife and my son Harold." He began to shake violently. "Ah-h, God," he wailed, "he was only four!" He wept for a few moments.

"Well," he said finally, "they come up missing, see, and I couldn't find them for a couple of days and I was just *crazy* over it." He was heaving now, heaving with the anguish of his story, and weeping openly, and wiping his eyes with those great gnarled hands.

"Bill Miller and Luther Ameigh, about three days after *that* even, found them."

I wanted so badly to say the right thing, but I could find no words.

"Found them by accident," he said, "down in the cellar of the church. By a big busted out place in the wall."

He paused once more.

Somehow when he began to speak again it was almost matter-of-factly, almost as if he were denying that any of it had actually ever happened.

"They had gone down there for *some* reason, I don't know." He shrugged. "Why wouldn't they? And they were . . . They . . ." He shook his head again in that stiff way he had. "The men, they wouldn't let me down there."

Suddenly he was wringing his hands.

"I wanted to go get them, I swear I did. They were my family. But they wouldn't let me." He had to stop again for a few moments.

"Aach, mister, listen," he said, turning towards me. "I *wanted* to. I really . . . They was my . . . It was so . . . It . . ."

He was sobbing freely now. I found myself holding the hand of this stranger, weeping also. Weeping for him, weeping for his kin, weeping for the tears of things.

"Well," he said, summoning himself, "they got some guys to go down there, don't ask me how. They was just white with fear. But they went. And then they just pushed everything into the hole, the big blocks, some big rocks they brought down, the mud. *Everything*. Just pushed it all in. They put the sandstone blocks back. And then they bricked it all up. Fast."

He wiped his eyes again and stuffed his handkerchief back into his overalls pocket. "Some grave," he said bitterly. He sat quietly for a few moments, and I did not speak.

"I really did try to go down there," he said coldly.

"I'm sure you did," I said.

I was stunned by what I had heard, hardly able to comprehend how he felt as he finished talking or must have felt so many years before. There was nothing I could say to him. I looked up, startled at the idle whistling of a passerby.

"Well," he said finally, "we figured to dam up the narrows down below town enough to flood at least the church tunnel. And I can't even say why. We spent the most of one day doing that. Seems foolish now. It was something to do, I guess. You know how you get." Again he turned his body to face me. "More of it got out then. And people really up and left after that. I guess they figured enough was enough."

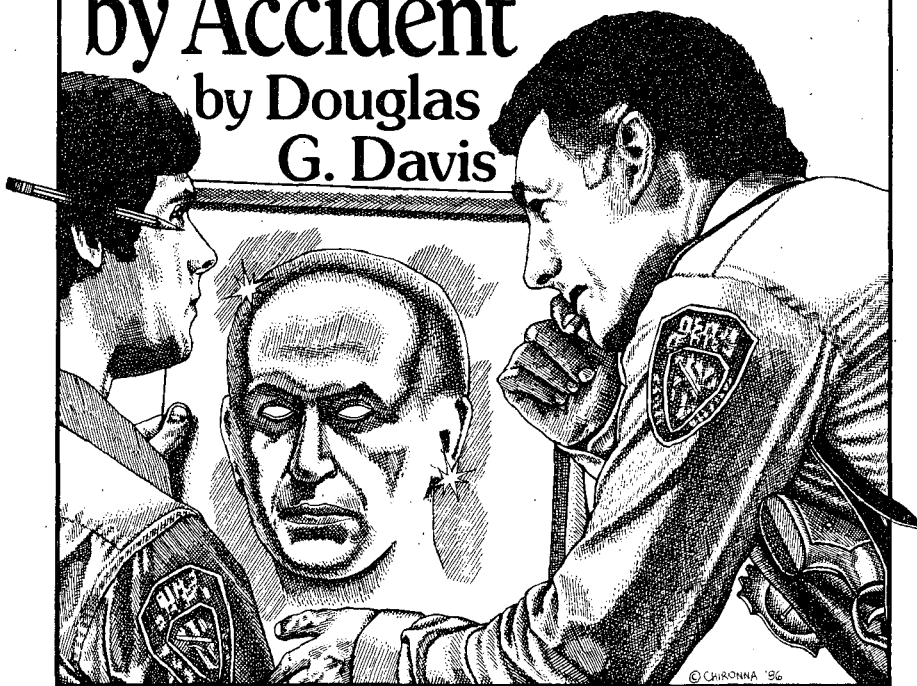
I listened to his story, hardly able to believe it and yet not able to disbelieve it. I heard him say something about locking doors to homes no one would ever enter again. And the town emptying forever without a word to anyone outside Garlock's Bend about the thing that was out in the lake.

But now I only vaguely heard what he was saying through his final tears. I was trying to deal, one last sad time, with all the memories that his story of so long ago brought back to me. I relived once again the awesome thumps, the crumpled patch, and the filthy smells of rot. Once again I clung in desperation to that tree outside the church, heaving for fresh air, awed by the bitter irony of the quiet lake and the green summer hills.

And I remembered that sudden deep swirl in the water. How innocent and how like a gust of air it had seemed to be.

Murder by Accident

by Douglas
G. Davis



6:00 A.M. *Monday*
The warm morning sun rose over a misty avenue, slowly evaporating the haze. Lawns and sidewalks were heavy with dew as the air became fresh and clean. A peaceful quietness surrounded the neat, manicured neighborhood of Greenlawn, interrupted only by the irregular growl and bark

of Simon Johnson's wire-haired pinscher.

As the gray fog gave way to the ever increasing light, Jimmy Pall, the newsboy, weaved his bicycle back and forth across Elmwood Street, tossing the morning newspapers halfheartedly towards his customer's houses. None ever fell by the doorways, instead land-

ing on rooftops, clinging to evergreen bushes, or splashing in puddles. One dropped near the head of Joseph Gordon as his body grew cold and stiff in the wet grass.

Mrs. Agatha Jones opened the squeaky door of the brick ranch, gingerly tiptoeing down the sidewalk, trying to avoid the night crawlers that sought the warmth of the concrete. She was obese and dressed in a grimy nightrobe that hung too short; her ugly, rolled-down hose exposed her knees. Her large breasts drooped and she did nothing to hide them as she bent over to retrieve the mis-thrown newspaper. One of the pink curlers fell from her ratty hair, rolling out of her reach into a puddle. Disgusted, she kicked at it with plump toes, splattering water drops every which way, causing other curlers to droop down around her head. She returned to the house, slamming the door in unexpressed anger.

6:15 A.M.

Simon Johnson creaked open the garage door, smiling as the rusty rollers squeaked and banged at the stops. Blacky stopped barking, recognizing his master, who brought a fat chunk of raw meat. The dog chewed on the beef hungrily. Johnson chuckled mischie-

vously, hearing the ringy-ting of Jimmy Pall's bicycle bell. With a flick of his hand, he unclipped the retaining leash and yelled, "Sic 'em!"

Jimmy saw the flash of black fur racing towards him. He kicked at the snarling, bared teeth, losing a piece of the tennis shoe rubber. He jabbed his foot at the dog again, smacking its nose. Blacky yelped and retreated instantly, then caught sight of another leg. Johnson ran to his pet, pulling it away from Joseph Gordon's body. The dog snarled, flapping the mouthful of trouser material and flesh into the air, growling and barking viciously, digging claw marks into the soft earth as Johnson pulled it backwards by the collar.

At precisely six thirty an alarm rang. Aletha Woodrow sat up in bed and silenced the clock with a finger. She'd barely slept all night, pondering suicide for the hundredth time. Why shouldn't she kill herself? What reason did she have to live? Still single at thirty-nine years of age, plain of face and figure, depressed and lonely. She couldn't face becoming forty next month—and still a virgin.

It was the same damned routine every morning and every night that bothered her. She got up at six thirty, showered, dressed, ate breakfast, and ar-

rived at work by eight, typing stupid letters and memos for three stuffy old attorneys. She'd never meet any young men her age in that place. Then home by six, eat supper, watch TV, read a book, and go back to bed.

Aletha's meager income barely paid the taxes on the house her parents had willed to her. Food and utilities took their share. She'd managed to save a few hundred dollars a year for a couple of days' vacation at a nearby resort area. She hadn't gone there in the last two years, however. Too shy to make new friends or advances towards men, she felt embarrassed being alone. She didn't feel pretty enough to attract anyone. Hell, she could walk along the beach stark naked and not even get a reaction, except maybe arrested for indecent exposure.

She'd even bungled her attempts at suicide. The last time was a farce. Swallowing all those aspirins only made her sick enough to wish she'd died, and gave her a persistent ringing in her ears as a reminder of the failure.

Aletha slid behind the steering wheel of her father's old Ford, backed out of the drive, and sped off towards town wiping tears out of her eyes, noticing a police car and ambulance at the end of the street.

7:12 A.M.

Nearly every morning Charlie Pate could be found puttering in his cluttered garage. There wasn't room for a car any more, his wife complained to no avail. Charlie, an inveterate tinkerer, collected mechanical parts and fixtures gleaned from junkyards and garage sales.

Some called him a pack rat or a trash picker, but Charlie thought of himself as a hardware freak, robotics in particular. By trade he was a designer for an electronics firm, enabling him to pick up circuitry and computer parts at bargain prices.

To anyone who ventured in the garage, Charlie's conversation was spattered with technical terms and words that clearly confused the casual onlooker. He said he was building a robot, one that would do simple chores around the house, picking up clothes, vacuuming. Though he spent all of his spare time before work and often late into the evening in the garage, no one ever saw a practical model that resembled anything more than a shopping cart.

But Charlie didn't show his more sophisticated pieces to anyone. There were a lot of "pirates" out there who'd steal any worthy project like the prosthetic hand and arm for the handicapped, selling it out from

under him. He kept some things in a large, locked cabinet, opening it only at night when the garage door was closed and he was alone. Even his wife Nancy didn't know all he had out there in the "pit," as she called it.

Sometimes Nancy could hear her husband banging and hammering something metallic, drilling holes, or welding. Once in a while it grew quiet in the garage except for a strange sound that resembled a soft whirr, the sound a motor would make. She rarely bothered him when he was busy. He was a good husband and the hobby, though sometimes expensive, didn't hurt anyone.

Most of the people in the neighborhood kept to themselves except for the Fergusons. Judy and Tom were in their late twenties, professional people with two cars, a boat, and a camper parked in the long drive. Their house wasn't any larger than the others, it just looked that way, being on a small rise that ended at a cul-de-sac.

The Fergusons gave the impression that they were jet setters, always coming and going, having back yard pool parties and late night get-togethers. Every weekend there were a half dozen cars in front of the house, and loud music and laughter filtered down the

street, assaulting the nearest homes.

Rumors spread that the parties were really orgies, husbands and wives trading partners, smoking pot, and snorting cocaine. The police had been called several times, but no charges had ever been made.

At nine P.M. Judy and Tom were alone. The lights came on in the living room, the shades were up, and the curtains were open wide. Those who lived to the west of the Fergusons could see the couple walking back and forth past the windows. They were both nude.

Lieutenant Conroy had met with each of the neighbors throughout the day, inquiring about Joseph Gordon. Did anyone know who might have wanted to kill him?

"Murder?" Agatha Jones gasped, heaving her enormous chest towards the detective. "Why, the worst thing that poor man ever did—and I admit he was a pain in the . . . uh . . . Well, he mowed his lawn every other morning at six A.M., like clockwork. Of course, no one could ever sleep when he was out there with that godforsaken, broken-down old mower, sputtering and coughing. Let me tell you, lieutenant, many times I thought the man . . ."

The detective thanked Mrs.

Jones, glad to get away from her constant jabbering. Just looking at her was enough to make a man lose his appetite.

None of the other neighbors knew any more than the old lady. They were typical mind-your-own-business people who didn't want to get involved. It wasn't any of their concern, they said. Gordon kept mostly to himself and seemed to have only that one peculiar trait.

10:47 P.M.

It had been a rough day at work and Tom needed another drink just to forget the lost contracts and bungling, inept salespeople he had to contend with. It was good to come home to a great-looking woman, a nice home, take off one's clothes and be free as nature intended for people to be. So what if the nosy neighbors could see in? Hell, most of them probably stood on chairs to get a better look.

He really needed a joint, but a bourbon would be an adequate substitute, for now. He wished Judy would hurry up and finish with her shower. Hot and sweaty, he planned to stand under a cold stream of water for a half hour.

10:51 P.M.

Tom poured a double shot of liquor in a glass and retreated

to his favorite chair, flipping on the TV as he passed by. The eleven o'clock news would come on in a few minutes. He downed the throat-burning liquid in two quick gulps, setting the empty glass on the arm of the chair. Hearing light footsteps behind him, Tom lifted the glass without looking back.

"Get me another drink, will ya, honey?"

A large hand slid down one side of Tom's face, grabbing the jaw while the other rested on his head. He heard two noises an instant before the room went totally black, a soft fluttering sound and the crack of his neck breaking.

10:55 P.M.

Judy heard a muffled thump as she stepped out of the tub. She called her husband's name but got no response.

Grabbing a towel and wiping her hair dry, she padded through the thick carpeting to the living room.

Tom lay sprawled in the chair at an awkward angle, his head tilted to one side as if asleep. An empty glass lay on the floor with ice cubes melting into the rug. Judy turned off the TV and sat on her husband's lap, still dripping wet from the shower. She playfully patted his cheek, trying to revive him. Then she heard a noise and glanced over

her shoulder, opening her mouth to scream. The sound never came out.

6:00 P.M. *Tuesday*

Lieutenant Conroy stood on the doorstep when Aletha Woodrow arrived home. He'd been ringing the bell and had just turned to leave when she pulled into the driveway. She hoped he didn't want to talk about the rundown condition of the car. It was bad, she knew, but a new model would cost at least a year's salary.

"Good evening, Mrs. Woodrow." He tipped his hat, displayed the shiny badge, and introduced himself.

"Miss," Aletha corrected.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's Miss Woodrow. I'm . . . single." Aletha turned her face slightly away and downward, expressing shame. Conroy thought he saw a faint blush. Unusual in a woman her age. He guessed thirty-five, or so. Not bad looking, a bit quiet, nervous.

"Miss Woodrow—have you noticed any strangers roaming about the neighborhood? Anyone at all who shouldn't be in this area?"

"No." Her voice seemed quiet, reserved.

"Did you know there was a murder committed?"

"You mean poor Mr. Gordon?

I saw the emergency vehicles yesterday morning and I read something about it in the paper. Are you certain it was murder?"

"Couldn't be anything else. The man's neck was broken by someone who is very tall and strong. Obviously, miss, you're not a suspect."

"I should think not . . ." Aletha placed both hands on her mouth, as though shocked at the possibility. She dropped her arms down. "After all, as you can see, I am neither very tall or very strong."

"What do you know about the Fergusons at the end of the lane? Have you ever associated with them or any of their friends?"

"Why, no! Why they walk around stark na . . . uh, without clothes—and right in front of the open windows. Not that I've seen them up close. I couldn't! But Mrs. Jones . . ."

"Ah, yes, Mrs. Jones." Conroy wiped his forehead with a handkerchief, stuffing it in his hip pocket. Miss Woodrow was a sensitive woman, withdrawn and a private person. He couldn't imagine her at one of the Fergusons' parties.

"They won't any more, miss. They were both found dead early this morning by their cleaning lady. Necks were broken."

Aletha fainted, falling into

the detective's arms. He carried her to the sofa and ran to the kitchen for a damp cloth and a glass of water. By the time he returned, she was sitting up. "Here, drink this." Conroy patted her brow and neck with the cloth. Aletha was embarrassed. No man had ever paid so much attention to her before. Even though he was a policeman and would do that for anyone, she felt special.

"Are you all right now? Look. I have to be going soon but I'll tell you what. I'll call you later to see how you're doing—in an hour or so. Maybe we can go somewhere... have a cup of coffee together. What do you say?"

"You're just being kind, but it's not necessary. Really."

"No, no! I mean it. Strictly off-duty. Sort of like a get-to-know-you-before-I-ask-you-for-a-date type of thing. How 'bout it?"

She looked into his eyes. He seemed sincere enough. If only she could be sure. But how many other guys had asked her out in the last few years? One, two. Certainly no more than two.

"Okay," she answered softly. He took her hand and led her to the door.

"Make sure you lock it after I leave," he added.

Aletha closed the door, slid the dead bolt into place, and

leaned her back against the warm wood. Could there possibly be a chance for romance with Lieutenant Conroy? He was kind of cute, distinguished looking. A little gray at the temples. Taller than she—and nice.

It seemed strange that he had come to her house at that particular moment. So infernally lonesome and depressed lately, she'd considered suicide again. She'd even spent part of her day contemplating exactly how to do it. Would a note be appropriate? Who would read it anyway? She had no relatives to leave the house and furniture to. What did they do with other people's possessions when the deceased was intestate? Auctioned off, she supposed. She should know, working for lawyers, but she only typed letters, invoices, and memos. Nothing ever interesting or important.

Even if nothing came of her faint hopes with the lieutenant, she could always bump herself off later. Why rush into it? When you're alone and lonely, there's always plenty of time.

Conroy walked slowly towards his car thinking about Aletha. Given a chance he could fall for her, but she probably had several boyfriends. After all, there weren't too many really nice girls around these days.

Just as he opened the door

and plopped his lanky frame in the seat, a big black dog rushed towards the car, barely missing his pants leg. Conroy slammed the door and quickly rolled the window up. God, his heart was beating like a jackhammer! Somebody should do something about that. A wild animal should be on a leash—and the owner horsewhipped!

As he drove away, Conroy looked in the side view mirror at the snarling dog as it chased his car down the street. He'd call the pound later. Right then he had three murders to solve.

9:22 P.M.

"Just a minute. I'm coming. I'm coming!" Agatha Jones snapped at the ringing telephone, as if it could understand her anger.

"Hel-lo!" she yelled into the receiver. The caller hung up. Probably some damned kid playing games, or a sicko pervert who lost his nerve. She slammed the phone down, cutting off the dial tone. That happened too often to be a coincidence.

9:25 P.M.

Agatha returned to the vanity table and jerked a tissue out of its box, wiping the oil from around her eyes and cheekbones. Her hair was tucked beneath a yellow flowered, plastic shower cap. A few curls stuck

out from under the elastic band, tied with tissue paper and rubber bands.

The lid to the jar of cold cream was off. Agatha dipped two thick fingers into the muck, scooping out a large glob, and wiped it all over her face, swirling and rubbing the mixture deep into the pores. As an afterthought, she pursed her thick lips and spread bright red lipstick on them.

She wished she could lose weight and smooth out the crow's-feet around her eyes. The cream was supposed to help eliminate the wrinkles, but she didn't see any difference, and she'd gone through the same routine every night for years. Her hand moved towards the opened box of chocolates. Without thinking she plopped one into her mouth, realizing too late that it had facial cream on it from her fingers. She spat it out into a tissue, wiped her fingers and grabbed more candy.

9:40 P.M.

As she raised the sweets to her mouth, Agatha saw a movement in the mirror. It looked as if someone was standing in the shadows near the drapes. Suddenly, her heart skipped a beat. She saw a man moving towards her with arms outstretched and both hands curled.

With a speed that belied her size and weight, Agatha ran for

the phone. The man followed right behind her. She lifted the receiver and stuck a finger in the "0" hole, then quickly twisted the dial. A large hand grabbed her by the face. Her wide-open eyes and plump nose poked through the spread-apart fingers. A small, muffled choke burst from her lips as she felt a knee pressed against the middle of her back. The other arm clamped around her chest, the hand clutching a saggy breast. The operator answered as the telephone banged to the floor. Agatha's first thought was rape. It was also her last.

10:05 P.M.

Charlie Pate was worried. It was late. His wife had called him a half hour ago to come to bed. She wanted some attention, saying it was long overdue. But he couldn't leave the garage just yet. The timing was critical. He hadn't cleaned up the mess or put away his pet project. Just couldn't leave things lying around for someone to steal or trip over.

Nancy called his name again, sounding a bit irritated. He didn't blame her. He spent too much time tinkering and puttering around. Maybe he *was* a dreamer—or a fool.

Finally he closed the overhead door and put his creations away, locking them up securely

in the metal cabinet. Charlie hoped his wife wouldn't be asleep by the time he got to bed, or else he'd catch hell in the morning.

11:00 P.M.

"Good night, Aletha. I'll call you tomorrow. Okay?"

"Okay, Larry. Goodnight." She stood in the doorway until he returned to the car. "I had a nice time!" she yelled, waving.

Conroy smiled and drove away, the taillights growing smaller, like red eyes peering into the darkness.

It wasn't until she crawled between the sheets and turned out the light that Aletha realized Larry hadn't kissed her. He was a gentleman, treating her with respect, opening doors, holding her chair. Never once did he talk about police business or mention the murders.

Three deaths since Sunday night. It was incredible. Greenlawn had always been such a quiet area. There had never been any trouble since she and her parents moved in thirty years ago. Agatha Jones, Simon Johnson, Joseph Gordon, and a dozen or so others lived there then. Agatha had been recently widowed when little Aletha Woodrow, nine years old and scared to death, sold the first box of cookies for her Sun-

day School fund raiser. Actually, it was six boxes of chocolate mint.

Aletha watched the attractive, curvaceous woman devour one box after another. She said her husband Willie had died and eating sweets seemed to calm her down.

"Got anything with whipped cream in it?" Agatha searched through the paper bag. She stood up with a strange expression on her face, as if remembering something. Aletha sat quietly as the woman left the room and returned with a large box of assorted chocolates.

When she left, Aletha crossed the street towards the Gordons' home tucking the few dollars and a fistful of coins securely in her red vinyl purse. Mr. Gordon said, "No!" outright. He didn't want any damned cookies and he didn't want any damned little girls coming around selling them, either.

With tears in her eyes and an aching heart, Aletha decided to try making one more sale. The large bag was still heavy, even with the few boxes missing, and she rolled the top down for a better grip.

The little white hat with the red ribbon bobbed on her head as she marched down the sidewalk. Mrs. Woodrow had bought Aletha the navy blue skirt and matching jacket to go with the

white blouse and red bow tie she had received from an aunt. Her father gave her the white socks, black shoes, and her favorite, the red purse. It had been the best birthday she'd ever had.

As she neared the last house Aletha froze in instant fear. An enormous brown dog stood next to Mr. Johnson. They were both looking at her. Simon Johnson slowly kneeled, his hand moved towards the clip on the dog's collar. He was going to release it!

Aletha walked backwards a few steps, then turned and ran as fast as her legs could move. She heard Johnson yell, the clicking of claws scratching on concrete, and the deep, guttural growling as the dog drew closer. She looked back, still running. The large yellow eyes flared with excitement as the animal drooled and snarled.

There was nothing else she could do. Too far from the safety of her own house, she dropped the bag. It split open, bursting containers, strewing cookies on the walk. The dog slid to a halt before the food, clutching it in its jaws, twisting back and forth, thrashing and shredding the paper and cardboard.

Terrified, Aletha ran into the house. Her father scooped her into his arms and patted her back, wiping the flood of tears,

promising to give her the money for the lost cookies. For several weeks nightmares kept her awake. She saw beady eyes, yellowed fangs, heard the barks and growls of the vicious beast.

Safe now, she rested in her own bed, warm and comfortable, thirty years later. The memory never went away though she no longer dreamed about it. Ever since, Aletha had avoided Simon Johnson and his long succession of evil dogs.

6:27 A.M. *Wednesday*

The newspapers reported the sordid accounts of the recent deaths in Greenlawn. Every one a customer of Jimmy Pall, too! Already he'd lost money on the Fergusons and old man Gordon. He was tired of the paper route anyway. Everyone complained either about his being too slow or his bad aim. It wasn't bad. The papers always landed exactly where he wanted them to.

Jimmy had wanted to get rid of the route months ago, but his dad insisted he earn his own spending money. But it wasn't worth getting up so early, folding the papers, lugging them all over creation, then getting chased by that mean dog of Johnson's. He especially liked to throw his paper on the roof. That'd teach the old coot to let that animal run wild. Jimmy

only needed one more excuse to quit. His dad could rant and rave and smack him all he wanted.

6:32 A.M.

As he rode the bike cautiously down the street, Jimmy noticed several things happening at once. Charlie Pate opened his garage door and started working on one of his junky machines. Blacky, Johnson's dog, caught sight of him and strained against the tether, barking and clawing at the air; Mr. Johnson stuck his head out the door then, just as quickly, disappeared; and a light came on in Miss Woodrow's bedroom.

Jimmy Pall had never seen a naked woman before. He'd heard that the Fergusons paraded around nude, but not when he was in the area. Maybe if he sneaked up to the window real quiet he'd be lucky enough to catch sight of bare flesh.

He leaned the bicycle against the house, looking over his shoulder to see if he was being watched. A row of elm trees ran between Aletha Woodrow's house and the Gordons', concealing him. Jimmy gripped the windowsill and stood up on tiptoes. Aletha had just slipped off her nightgown and stood braless. She slid open the dresser drawer and retrieved a pair of panties, then hooked her fin-

gers into the band of those she wore.

At the same instant Aletha stepped out of the underwear; Jimmy felt himself lifted off the ground. A man held him up by the shirt with one hand, swinging him effortlessly. Probably a cop who would throw him in jail for window peeping. But when Jimmy looked at the face, he whimpered and shook like a baby.

6:38 A.M.

The man, or whatever, easily stood seven feet tall. He wore a mask of metal over his head, almost as if it were a Halloween costume. Jimmy wasn't sure exactly. The tears in his eyes blurred his vision. But he could see one thing. The empty right hand slowly moved towards his face. The fingers opened, clutching Jimmy by the chin, squeezing his cheeks and lips forward. It hurt, but he couldn't say a thing. If he could only get his feet on the ground, he'd get out of there fast!

The man turned Jimmy's face, pressing his nose against the boy's. He made a noise that Jimmy took as a growl, but it sounded like a mixture of a cough and a whistle.

6:39 A.M.

Suddenly, and without warning, the giant tossed Jimmy to

the ground as easily as throwing a paper airplane into the wind. He looked up, stunned from the fall. The thing just stood there, dressed like a man, whistling and wheezing and waving its arm like a man but with the face of a metallic clown.

Jimmy got up and ran to his bike, pedaling away quickly, leaving the half-full bag of newspapers behind. He didn't care. That was it. The last straw. He'd never, ever come back to this crazy place again.

Blacky came running around the side of the house and caught sight of the stranger. He took an offensive stance and lunged, growling and snapping his jaws around an arm, clinging and kicking and biting in mid-air. Then he choked and gagged as his throat was crushed between five long fingers. The dead animal lay discarded among the bushes.

Aletha heard a noise by the side of the house but decided she had to hurry. Larry said he might meet her at noon and they'd have lunch together. The thought made her so happy she didn't notice Simon Johnson running past her window.

7:09 A.M.

Charlie slammed the cabinet shut and slid the padlock through the bracket holes, snapping the lock ends to-

gether. Each time he seemed to get messier than before. Both hands were covered with grease, dirt, and grime mixed with blood. He'd pinched his fingers with pliers and banged them with a hammer until they were black and blue. Someday he'd start a new hobby, maybe one Nancy would be interested in as a joint project. Of course, he'd have to get rid of all the junk in the garage first. Probably have to dismantle the things in the cabinet and sell the parts. At least get some money out of the stuff.

7:25 A.M.

Nancy had breakfast ready and appeared surprised when Charlie came after the first call. Easier to get along with lately, more affectionate and loving, Charlie didn't seem to be so engrossed in his metal toys as before. That made her feel better. It wasn't safe to be alone any more, not with all the murders going on.

When that Lieutenant Conroy had stopped by, she didn't know what to tell him. He wanted to talk to Charlie, but as soon as he saw him, the lieutenant asked a few questions, then left. He said he was looking for a big man, a very strong man. The only person who fit that description was Simon Johnson. He was big—over six

feet tall, in his sixties. Could he possibly have done those horrid things?

11:54 A.M.

The phone rang in the offices of Dorsey, Wilson, Turner & Associates, located on the twelfth floor of the Consolidated Insurance Building. The operator answered and buzzed Aletha. Larry Conroy was in the lobby downstairs waiting for her to leave at twelve. When they met, Aletha kissed Conroy on the cheek. She knew it was brazen of her, but it would break the ice.

Larry looked worried as they walked towards the Green Lantern restaurant. Did he have second thoughts about her? Would he tell her over lunch that he didn't want to continue their relationship?

"Another murder," he said explaining his uneasiness. "Mrs. Agatha Jones."

"Mrs. Jones! Dead?" Aletha sat back in her chair shocked at the news.

"Seems at almost the very moment of the attack, she dialed the operator. The operator heard noises—a scream—traced the call, and informed the police. When they mentioned the Greenlawn area, I rushed over to the address."

"Was it—like the others?" The words came out haltingly,

almost as though she didn't really want to know the answer. The subject wasn't the best to help one digest lunch. Larry took the hint, backing off. The rest of the hour was just for Aletha.

"Minor differences, but otherwise pretty much the same. Why don't we order now?"

They ate, discussing lighter topics, forgetting they were in the midst of a hundred other people; forgetting the murder and fear and chaos that had brought them together; remembering only the look in their eyes, the touch of the hands, the smiles and kisses. As for the rest of the world, it didn't exist. For the moment.

2:17 P.M.

Conroy sat at the antiquated green metal desk, shuffling stacks of papers, studying M.O.'s, reviewing each death, the times and methods. He didn't have much to go on. There were too few clues.

The murderer was tall and strong. His height and weight were calculated from the shoeprints in the grass to be six six to seven feet tall, one hundred eighty to two hundred pounds. He broke the necks of Joseph Gordon and the Fergusons as if they were matchsticks. It took a little more effort to kill Agatha Jones. They discovered a

large bruise on her back—probably from a knee—and her neck was also broken.

What had they done to deserve death? No one could figure that out. The women hadn't been molested, and no valuables were taken. Rape and robbery were ruled out. It appeared that the same man had killed all four people and that he acted alone. Yet no one in the neighborhood had seen a stranger lurking about. There were no witnesses to the crimes, and none of the others fit the description, with the exception of Simon Johnson. Yet Conroy couldn't picture him as the suspect. Johnson stood over six feet tall, had big arms and a barrel chest, and, from the statements of the others, acted mean and despicable. But a murderer?

Obviously Aletha Woodrow couldn't hurt a fly. Too quiet, meek, and small of build to have done it. Sometimes Conroy suspected she feared her own shadow, but lately, she had begun opening up, like a flower in blossom. She needed a lot of attention, and he intended to give her just that.

Mrs. Gordon, a small woman, returned her husband's body to New York where they originally came from. Her house was already for sale.

The Pates were an average

couple, married eight years. He was of medium build, serious minded, worked on electronic components in his garage. Nancy reminded Conroy of Aletha, thin and attractive but more lighthearted and carefree.

Conroy interviewed the milkman, the postal carrier, and the newspaper boy; the only other people who came regularly to the small development. The other thirty residents checked out okay. Innocent neighbors, who were as bewildered as Conroy. What other conclusion could be drawn except that a stranger, perhaps an escapee from another county, had come into the area and killed several people just for the hell of it? Motive? Conroy couldn't pin it down. The only information he could squeeze out of the others was too skimpy to form an opinion about.

Gordon had done nothing worse than mow his lawn early in the mornings. Irritating, sure, but not grounds for murder. The Fergusons flaunted their nudity by the windows for all who cared to watch. What had Agatha Jones done other than be a lonely and miserable, old, homely woman?

If those were crimes, then no one was safe. The world is full of ordinary people going about their lives, sometimes in a fumbling manner, making mis-

takes, grumbling and growling, but somehow we survive it all.

There are also a lot of kooks out roaming the streets, ready to stab a person in the back for a dollar or because someone didn't like another's looks. Nothing made sense any more. Murder is senseless.

4:30 P.M.

The phone rang, breaking Conroy's concentration. He shoved his papers aside and lifted the receiver and mumbled.

"Lieutenant Conroy, please." A feminine voice, sounding worried and upset, causing Conroy to pay more attention.

"Speaking. What can I do for you?" Conroy answered.

"It's my son, Jimmy—Jimmy Pall," the voice replied.

"Jimmy, the newspaper boy for the Greenlawn district?"

"Yes. He is. I mean, was," the woman replied. "He's not going back to that—that place again—ever."

"Just calm down, Mrs. Pall, what seems to be the problem? Is Jimmy hurt?" Conroy said.

"He's got bruises all over his body—and scared to death! He claims to have seen a monster—or a man dressed like one. I don't know whether to believe him or not, but he's awfully shook up, and there are the bruises!"

"I'd like to send a car for Jimmy," Conroy said. "Bring him in to look at mug shots and have our staff artist make a composite sketch from his description."

Conroy thanked the woman for calling. Maybe this was the very break he needed to crack the case. An eyewitness who'd actually seen the man and lived to tell about it.

6:45 P.M.

Somebody was going to pay dearly for killing Blacky, Simon Johnson moaned. He'd been the favorite dog out of seven he'd owned over the years. Blacky was the smartest of them all. And the meanest. That was why Johnson liked him so much. He kept little kids out of the yard and troublesome salesmen away from the house. Strangers didn't hang around long when they were looking down the throat of a hungry wire-haired pinscher.

Now he'd have to buy another after burying Blacky in the back yard by the dog's favorite tree. He used to lie in the shade gnawing on bones and eating the chunks of beef Johnson handed him. No one else could ever get near the animal, not even Johnson's wife. Of course she wouldn't go near anything or anybody because she feared everything, even her shadow.

Simon hated the old bag. She was a stone around his neck. The proverbial ball and chain. Always sick and complaining about one thing or another. First she didn't like his temper, then she said he didn't love her any more. Hell, he doubted if he ever had! Then she bitched about his dogs. She didn't like the noise, the barking, and the smell. Not to mention the cost of dog food. He recalled that she once said, "Simon, you treat that damned dog better than you do me!"

That was the first time he hit her. It wasn't the last, though. She just wouldn't keep her fat old mouth shut. Someday he'd like to shut her mouth forever.

Johnson tenderly laid the animal on the ground and began digging a hole in the soft earth. When he'd removed enough dirt so that he could spread Blacky out full length, Simon wrapped the dog in a burlap bag. He placed its body in the hole and shoveled the dirt back in, pounding it into a small mound. He bowed his head in a reverence that only he knew was sincere.

"Simon! Simon Johnson, what are you doing out there on your knees?" Mrs. Johnson yelled from the back door. "For god sakes, don't I have enough to do now without having to worry about grass stains?"

Johnson tried to ignore his wife, but the shrill voice grated on his nerves. The words sounded as if they came from the nose instead of through the lips.

"Simon, do you hear me?" she called, leaning halfway out the screen door.

Of course he heard her. The whole neighborhood heard her. That screechy, whiny voice hung in the air, like a siren. She hadn't always been like that. In the beginning, she was quite attractive and well off financially, or so she led him to believe. Once they were married, she let her physical appearance deteriorate and all the money went towards the house and furniture and the little bit of land.

Johnson had to work hard for a living, not having a degree to help him get an easy desk job. All the money he made his wife spent until he learned to control the checkbook. She had started the whining twenty-five or thirty years ago, and Simon turned to dogs for affection and to take his mind off the old bag.

"Simon! I want you to come here a minute," Mrs. Johnson screamed. "I need you in here. Do you hear me, Simon? Simon!"

Simon Johnson got up slowly, rubbing grass clippings and dirt off his pants knees. He clutched

the shovel tightly until his knuckles were white. She stood too far away for him to throw it at her. More than ever he wished her dead—and if Blacky were still alive, he'd make sure she went down and never got up again.

Once the tools were put away, Simon wiped his brow with an old rag, swung open the squeaky screen door, and stepped into the cool house. He felt tired and angry—and by God his wife had better stay out of the way!

By seven thirty Nancy Pate had finished dressing, ready to go out on the town. Charlie had been forewarned that she wanted to go to a fancy restaurant, dancing, and to a movie. He could always play with his "toys" in the garage some other day. Tonight was her night and Charlie wasn't going to worm his way out of it.

8:00 P.M.

The artist had come up with a sketch according to the information Jimmy Pall had given him. But it didn't look like anyone in their mugshot books.

Lieutenant Conroy figured the man wore a metallic-looking mask. There was no other explanation. None that he knew of, and he'd been in the business a long time. He remembered several other cases that involved one murderer and sev-

eral victims. The man chose the people carefully, killing them quickly and efficiently, much like the present case. Conroy caught each man through a process of adding individual clues together, like pieces in a puzzle. When the men died in the electric chair, they went out screaming.

8:12 P.M.

It gradually became dark outside. The gray blended into black almost as though an artist's brush wiped the color out of the sky. Tiny dots of stars started blinking on, seeming brighter with each passing moment.

Aletha felt bored. She'd come home high with the expectation of hearing from Larry, but he never called. She ate a cold sandwich of salami and Swiss cheese, piling tomato, mustard, and onion on it. When irritated or sad and lonely, she'd eat anything, regardless of the pain it caused her stomach later. She could always turn to Pepto-Bismol for comfort.

11:01 P.M.

They'd had a great time in Summerville. Nancy danced well and she fit in Charlie's arms like a glove. Charlie noticed a lot of guys looking at his wife as she spun around in circles, the dress whirling and

climbing, exposing curvaceous, tanned legs. She had the body of a slender belly dancer; her chest and bottom were neither too large nor too small. Yet when they met fifteen years ago the first thing Charlie noticed were Nancy's eyes. They looked so innocent he had to believe she was the one he'd wed some day.

They married and for a while things seemed to run pretty smoothly, but Charlie discovered something happening. The world was falling apart right before their eyes, and no one but he seemed to realize it.

It wasn't simply that crime, divorce, and unemployment rose to all-time highs; or that interest rates were outrageous, and college graduates were considered illiterate; there were a thousand other things that indicated the world had gone crazy. TV, music, movies, literature, and art had become little more than an outlet for trash. Booze and drugs became the new gods. Sex wasn't love any more—it was lust.

Then Charlie noticed that little things bugged him more than the larger issues; the things they didn't organize committees to study or try to correct. Things like women wearing shorts and skimpy tops in restaurants, kids setting off firecrackers late at night while people tried to sleep, or an idiot

walking back and forth in front of houses carrying a blaring radio on his shoulder.

So Charlie started doing things about it, retaliating against those people who insulted his sensibilities, who disturbed his sleep or irritated him. He set up a speaker system by the bedroom window of the boy with the radio, running wires back to his own house, where at three o'clock in the morning, every morning for a week, he planted messages into the sleeping boy's mind. One day the boy ran away and never came back.

Charlie and Nancy Pate had moved to Greenlawn six years ago in hopes of finding a quiet, peaceful neighborhood. The only things Charlie wanted to hear in the mornings were the chirping birds, the blowing wind, and the falling rain. He couldn't talk his wife into a farm isolated from others, so they chose Greenlawn.

Then Simon Johnson's dog began barking all night and Joseph Gordon mowed his lawn every other morning at six. Charlie noticed the succession of newsboys were all the same: either late with the paper or they threw it in the bushes. The last one did both. He also noticed the Fergusons' perverted pleasure in nude exhibitionism, and Agatha Jones's crude dis-

play of combined ugliness and obesity, and poor Aletha Woodrow, sad and lonely, afraid and suicidal. Fortunately, the other homes were too far away down the street to bother him.

One day Charlie devised a plan to eliminate those problems, and as soon as his wife fell asleep, he'd continue the work.

11:45 P.M.

Aletha began crying. Larry hadn't called her or stopped by. She hadn't heard from him since lunch. Could he have gotten hurt, or killed by some crook? Or perhaps he didn't really care for her at all—was toying with her affections.

One other man had led her on trying to get her to go to bed with him. He told her that if she loved him she would. She said if he loved her, he wouldn't ask. They argued about it every time they saw each other—which wasn't all that often. Aletha knew he saw other girls, those who would do what he wanted. But she wouldn't give in. She wanted marriage before sex—or she'd do without both. Of course, he left her. She wasn't so sure she'd made the right decision. Until she met Larry Conroy.

Although they'd only known each other a couple of days, Aletha sensed that Larry was dif-

ferent. He never laid a hand on her—or discussed sex at all. They spoke to each other of their hopes and dreams, pasts and futures. And in that short time she fell in love.

No one could possibly understand how she really felt unless that person too had lost his or her parents when barely eighteen. Being alone for over twenty years, always hoping to meet some nice man to love and marry and have his children, yet never fulfilling that hope, had taken its toll. She'd spent thousands of lonely nights staring out of the window, counting stars, gazing at the moon, dreaming dreams that never came true.

It might seem foolish to others, but she didn't like her own company. She wanted to share life with someone other than three decrepit attorneys and a few other co-workers. Aletha needed a purpose, to feel good about herself—and how else could she unless someone cared for her?

The tears continued to flow. Her heart ached as she tried to tell herself that it didn't really matter that Larry hadn't called—there'd be other men, maybe.

She could learn to accept the fact that she would be alone for the rest of her life, or she could end it right then and not have

to worry and suffer any more.

Aletha was so consumed with her thoughts, with the unanswered questions running through her mind, she didn't see the long fingers slip under the partially opened window. She heard only her lonely heartbeat, not the sound of the curtains or the soft steps behind her. Her eyes were glued to the phone. She could see nothing else; not the giant of a man standing nearby, or the large hands curled only inches away from her slender neck. Then the phone rang.

"Larry!" Aletha wiped the tears from her eyes, hoping her voice sounded cheerful.

"Sorry I'm so late. Been working on this infernal case. But I've got a couple of leads and I should be able to solve it soon. I just wanted to hear your voice and tell you . . ."

"Yes! Tell me what?" Aletha placed one hand on her heart, gripping the phone tightly with the other.

"I know you're going to think I'm a kook, but even though these murders have me working late and I'm up to my neck in paperwork, I just wanted you to know you're on my mind—and—" Larry said, stuttering "—I—well, I love you. There, I said it."

"You love me! You really do? Say it again," Aletha cried.

"I love you—I love you," Larry repeated, feeling foolish at all the bemused stares he received from his fellow officers.

"Oh, I'm so glad. I love you, too, Larry," Aletha replied, holding the receiver tightly, as if her life depended on it.

Aletha hung up the phone after Larry promised to see her the next day. He told her to lock all the doors and windows before going to bed. When she rose from the sofa and walked to the window, Aletha was shocked to see it wide open. It shouldn't have come as any surprise, she'd done a lot of other silly things lately without realizing it, like talking to herself.

It was all because of Larry, she thought, closing the window. She locked it securely and pulled the drapes together. Now she could go to bed and get a good night's sleep. She was in love and, unbelievably, Larry loved her, too!

12:30 A.M. *Thursday*

An hour after Johnson's wife fell asleep, she began snoring loudly. Johnson quietly slipped out of bed, went to the living room to open a window. The timing was perfect. He would smother the old bag, spend the night in the guest room, and call the police around ten A.M. They'd think the killer climbed in and killed her. He'd finally

be free of her—and the insurance check would be icing on the cake.

Strange. The window was already open. Maybe his wife had raised it earlier. All the better; her fingerprints would be on the framing, not his.

Simon returned to the bedroom, not realizing someone followed him. His wife still snored loudly. He took the pillow from his side of the bed and held it in both hands, inches above her ugly face.

"Die, you old bag! Die!" He shoved the pillow down hard, then sat on her legs, putting his weight against her struggling.

The woman's hands grabbed Simon's arms and scratched, but he continued to push, squeezing the air out of her lungs until she lay still. He waited a few minutes longer before getting up. Fortunately, the scratches hadn't broken the skin. There would be no flesh under her fingernails.

Simon felt her pulse just to be certain she was dead. He stood with his back to the door, unaware that someone stood, watching. He thought he heard a noise and turned, but it was nothing. He closed the bedroom door, checked the window again, and turned out the lights. He hadn't felt so good since watching Blacky chase the paperboy down the street. "God, how I

miss that poor, wonderful dog," Simon said aloud, weeping openly.

1:20 A.M.

Charlie Pate crawled between the sheets and placed his arm around Nancy. He lightly kissed her lips and quickly fell asleep.

7:30 A.M.

Aletha Woodrow drove to work feeling as though her life had just begun.

9:50 A.M.

Larry Conroy answered the phone in his office. Simon Johnson screamed hysterically. His wife had been murdered!

By six P.M. the newspapers carried the headlines:

MASKED MADMAN STRIKES AGAIN!

GREENLAWN, O.—The fifth victim of Greenlawn was reportedly murdered early this morning. According to Lt. Larry Conroy, Mrs. Simon Johnson was found by her husband, apparently asphyxiated. The coroner's report listed the time of death between 12 P.M. and 2 A.M. Lt. Conroy was quoted as saying, "There are some similarities to the mystery killer; however,

we have not drawn any conclusions at this time."

The four previous victims are Joseph Gordon, Agatha Jones, and Tom and Judy Ferguson. All the murders have occurred since late Sunday evening. The Greenlawn police have been unable to solve the crimes due to the lack of witnesses and clues. Lt. Conroy went on to say . . .

Nancy hadn't seen her husband so agitated before. Only yesterday he seemed fine. They'd enjoyed themselves dining and dancing and making love later. Of course, the murders upset him. She felt upset, too. For a while she was very frightened, but when she saw the police cars cruising the street every hour on the hour, her fears subsided. Besides, Charlie would protect her. He was strong. Nancy had watched him bend steel bars with his bare hands several times. Once, when some big guy tried to make a pass at her, Charlie lifted him right off the ground with one arm.

Nancy never once gave it a thought that her husband might be the murderer. Charlie? He wouldn't harm a fly. Anyway, the paper said the killer stood maybe seven feet tall.

Charlie was only five eleven.

7:00 P.M. *Friday*

The evening started off perfectly. Larry dressed in a new suit and he gave Aletha a dozen red roses. She'd never been given flowers in her life. And when their lips met, she melted in his arms.

They enjoyed a delicious dinner and the wine warmed Aletha's heart, making her slightly giddy. Larry chose an expensive restaurant, slipping the maitre d' a folded bill for a secluded table with romantic candlelight. They held hands tightly and danced to slow music.

After the meal Larry ordered champagne. They toasted the future and clinked the glasses, laughing and staring into each other's eyes.

"Aletha, will you marry me?" He opened the black velvet box, exposing a large diamond engagement ring. Aletha held out her left hand, the fingers spread apart. Larry slid it on the third finger and they kissed again.

Larry didn't tell Aletha about the most recent development. He wanted this evening to be special. Recounting the details of Mrs. Johnson's death would only be upsetting. Not that he could totally eliminate the thought from his own mind. It was strange. The previous victims had all died of broken necks. Why had this one been different?

It was a strange investiga-

tion. Larry got the impression that Johnson wasn't as mournful as he acted. The man seemed too anxious to point out that his wife had opened the window through which the murderer entered.

"Go on, check it! Do whatever you guys do to find fingerprints. You won't find mine on there," Johnson said, pointing to the sill.

Then there was the question why the Johnsons slept apart.

"She snored," Johnson replied. "God! The woman sounded like a thunderstorm. Guess sleeping in the other room was what saved me, eh, lieutenant?"

"It would seem so," Larry responded.

Dusting the windowsill confirmed only that there were no fingerprints at all. The way she died bothered Larry. What about the bruises on Johnson's arms?

"The dog's chain made them," Simon answered, covering the marks quickly.

"Where is the dog? I haven't seen him." Not that Larry really wanted to. He'd been close enough to the beast once before. It nearly took a chunk out of his leg.

"Blacky's dead. I buried him in the back yard. Some fiend broke his neck. Say, lieutenant," Johnson continued, "do you think maybe the same guy what killed my wife killed my dog, too?"

9:15 P.M.

Larry's thoughts returned to the present. He drove Aletha home and kissed her goodnight. She invited him in for coffee, but he declined.

"I've got to check some details about the investigation. I'll call you in the morning."

He left the car parked in Aletha's driveway and walked down the street, trying to collect his thoughts.

Larry saw Charlie Pate in his garage, toying with the same electronic parts he'd been working on earlier in the week.

The other houses were dark. The Gordons' and Joneses' houses were empty. Same for the Fergusons'. *For Sale* signs were everywhere. Only one other house had any lights on, the residence of Simon Johnson.

Larry walked on the grass away from the street lights. He saw the police cruiser come in view to his right and flagged it down.

"What say, lieutenant?" The officer pulled over.

"Hi, Sammie," Conroy replied. "Look, do me a favor and go down to the other end of the street. I want to nose around here a while and I'd like old man Johnson not to be able to see you."

The car drove away and Larry stepped back into the darkness.

He stood by the large evergreen bushes that dotted the entire area of Greenlawn. He waited for another thirty minutes before seeing any movement.

The back porch light came on at the house, and Johnson emerged moments later. He stood on the step a few seconds and then disappeared into the night. Larry moved along the hedgerow, trying to sight Johnson.

A dot of light came on, bouncing and sweeping across the wide lawn. Johnson had a flashlight. What would he be looking for in the back yard? The light stopped moving, then went low. Johnson knelt on the ground. Larry's eyes had adjusted to the darkness. He could see Johnson on his knees by the dirt mound, whispering.

Larry had gotten within twenty feet of the kneeling man when he heard sounds of crying. Johnson's large frame shook, racked with heaving sobs; then he fell upon the dirt, pounding his fists against the earth.

"Blacky . . . ! Why'd you have to die, Blacky? Now I'm all by myself," Johnson wailed.

Larry could hardly believe his eyes and ears. The man's wife is murdered in bed and he doesn't shed a tear, yet his heart is broken over the death of a dog.

Larry returned to his car, allowing it to coast down the

small inclined drive before turning the engine over. No use waking Aletha. She'd only worry.

10:17 P.M.

Charlie felt angry with himself. Disgusted would be the better word. How could the tragedy have happened? He thought he'd worked out all the bugs in his latest invention, the proudest achievement of his life.

He'd spent six years buying digital controls, a functional motor, sensors, and plug-in relay boards. He used square-wave oscillators and gate switches for medium and slow speed motions; steering controls and ultrasonic sensors for directional motion, and angle sensors to prevent his invention from falling over.

The unit was operated by a microchip computing system so advanced it could perform several human-like functions that others of its kind could not. Such as semirational thoughts and feelings, sophisticated but not perfected. He also installed a tape recorder in its torso to record the sounds and voices it actually heard while carrying out various commands. A receiver, much like a radio, was built in so that Charlie could communicate with his pet project: his robot.

At first Charlie felt pride in his achievement. He wanted to use it only to frighten the people away. He never expected the robot to kill people. Each evening, when the robot returned, Charlie listened to the tapes. It came as a surprise and a shock when he realized Joseph Gordon had died.

Charlie made some minor adjustments in the circuitry, hoping to alleviate the problem, but then it killed the Fergusons. He started to panic. Should he quit fooling with the robot and take it apart, or try again? Charlie opted to make another adjustment, but again a murder was committed. Agatha Jones.

Near hysterics, Charlie thought of turning himself in to the police. But he thought of his wife and his parents, how they'd be affected. Prison didn't sound too inviting, either. That is, if they let him live.

Another adjustment seemed to work. The robot merely scared off the paperboy, but an instant later it killed Simon Johnson's dog. That could have been an instinct of self-defense. The dog did attack first.

Believing he'd perfected the machine, he sent it out in hopes of frightening Aletha Woodrow so that she would stop being so self-centered. She might move away, and then Charlie wouldn't

have to see her acting so sad and lonely. He was pleased to hear on the tape recording that she'd fallen in love with Lieutenant Conroy.

But then the robot went on to the Johnsons' house. It returned too late in the evening for Charlie to listen to the tapes to find out what happened. The next day he read the papers. Mrs. Johnson was dead. An innocent victim!

That was the last straw. Charlie took the robot apart piece by piece, deciding never to play God again. He'd had good intentions. He just wanted peace and quiet; to be left alone. But no one would understand his motives. They wouldn't believe he hadn't originally meant to kill those poor people.

Later, the tapes revealed that the robot hadn't murdered Mrs. Johnson; her husband had. Charlie heard the words, "Die, you old bag! Die." What could Charlie do? How could he convince the police they should arrest Simon Johnson for one murder but not himself for four victims?

He couldn't.

But he could make it easier for the police to prove Johnson's guilt. He knew exactly how to do it. But he'd need a shovel and a flashlight first, and one more very special piece of equipment.

11:00 P.M.

The newspapers were beginning to get on Larry Conroy's nerves. They wanted the murderer caught. No one felt safe while the maniac roamed the streets. It wasn't just the papers. The D.A. threatened to take him off the case. The chief was ready to put him back on the beat. If he didn't solve the mystery soon, he'd go crazy.

11:10 P.M.

Nancy fell sound asleep, content with the lovemaking Charlie had given her. He'd been so attentive lately, and considerate, mentioning he'd like to start a family. Maybe she'd be pregnant soon. The time seemed right.

11:13 P.M.

A long, hot soak in the tub would be all Aletha needed to end the day. She was tired, but very happy. Work wasn't nearly as bad as it used to seem. The house had even taken on a new appearance. It no longer looked dark or felt so confining. Love did wonders for the heart and mind.

11:17 P.M.

Charlie grabbed his tools and stepped out into the darkness.

11:18 P.M.

It had been a long, eventful

day for Johnson. Alone for the first time in over forty years. But he could stand it, at least until he got another dog to replace Blacky.

Simon wiped the tears from his eyes, made sure all the windows and doors were locked, and went to bed. In the morning he'd go to Animal Welfare where he'd always gotten the dogs before. The animals there were meaner than the ones bought from private owners. Simon liked them mean. They kept better company.

11:30 P.M.

The ground was soft enough to make digging easy. Charlie shoveled as quickly as he could without making any noise. The lights had gone out in the house several minutes ago, so it should be safe enough.

When the spade struck the object, Charlie bent down and unwrapped the burlap, exposing the decaying dog carcass. Not a pretty sight. He was sort of glad the dog could no longer bother people, but it really hadn't been the animal's fault. The owner was sadistic and cruel, and his temperament had been transferred to the poor beast.

Charlie laid the flashlight at the end of the hole to make certain he placed the object exactly where it would make the most

effect when discovered. Then he wrapped the animal in its shroud and quickly spread the dirt evenly in a small mound. It looked pretty much as it had before.

11:47 P.M.

A phone call came in for Larry Conroy. He wasn't in the office at the moment, but they'd make sure he got the message. Charlie wished he could be there to see Simon Johnson's face.

12:32 A.M. *Saturday*

Three police cars, with sirens blaring and lights flashing, sped into Greenlawn, roared down the street, and screeched to a halt in front of Simon Johnson's house. Lieutenant Conroy jumped out of his car and took the steps to the front porch two at a time. He pushed the bell in a long, continuous ring until a light came on within. A grumbling Simon Johnson jerked open the door.

"What in the hell's the meaning of this intrusion?" he yelled, wiping the sleep out of his eyes.

"Mr. Johnson, I have every reason to suspect you of the murder of your wife and the four other people of this community," Larry informed the man.

"What! Listen here, lieutenant, those murders were committed by a . . . a monster, a

fiend," Johnson said, changing the tone of his voice. "Surely, you don't think that I . . ."

Larry turned to a blue-suited officer standing nearby. "Read him his rights, sergeant."

Once the formality was over, Larry showed Johnson the search warrant.

"We'd like to take a look around, Mr. Johnson. Why don't you show us where you buried the dog, sir," Conroy said, turning to one of the officers. "Get a shovel, will you, sergeant."

The small group of men walked around the side of the house, through the back yard to the lone elm tree, standing above the gravesite. It had grown cooler and Johnson pulled the collars of his robe together. He couldn't understand what the hell they expected to find in there but bones and worms.

The sergeant came along with the shovel and a few more flashlights. Eight men stood circling the grave while one shoveled the dirt. As the hole got larger Johnson felt more like laughing. The fools!

"Lieutenant," the sergeant called to Larry. Conroy moved closer to the hole, getting to his knees.

"Shine a light down here," he yelled. A moment later he stood facing Johnson.

"Did you dig this grave, Mr. Johnson?" Conroy asked.

"Of course I did! That's a silly question. I dug the hole myself and laid Blacky, right . . ."

Johnson's words froze in his throat as the sergeant uncovered the burlap wrapping. The flashlights beamed on the animal carcass, a shiny metal mask covering its skull, staring coldly at the shocked spectators.

"How in the hell did that get there?" Johnson spoke first.

"Only you know, Mr. Johnson. However, I can attest to the fact that I saw you kneeling by this very spot a little after nine P.M. last night."

Johnson muttered something incomprehensible. He was being set up. But by whom? How could that have happened? Only he and his wife knew the dog was buried there. Then Johnson remembered the news reporters. He'd told half the country everything.

"Wait a minute. Just wait one minute! What the hell does that mask mean, anyway?" Johnson fumed.

"This mask . . ." Larry held it with a plastic glove to keep his prints off it, "is the one described by the newsboy as the one the murderer wore."

"But the killer was supposed to be nearly seven feet tall," Johnson snapped, standing erect. "I'm not that tall, as you can see. How do you account for that, lieutenant?"

"There are several possibilities. Small stilts, large shoes, or an exaggerated account from a very frightened boy. A tall man looks like a giant to someone as small as Jimmy," Larry replied.

Simon Johnson suddenly couldn't find words to speak. He felt hands grasp his arms with a man on each side to escort him back to the house. The others led the way. When they reached the cars, a small group of people, in various stages of nightclothes, had gathered from the surrounding neighborhood. They wanted to see what the excitement was all about. It looked as if they had finally caught the Greenlawn murderer.

The police handcuffed Johnson and placed him in the back seat of a patrol car. Several news reporters approached the window, taking pictures; flash bulbs popped, fingers pointed. Simon noticed a news camera focusing in on his haggard face. He raised his chained arms to hide, growling in anger, shouting curses at the onlookers. The only person Simon Johnson recognized was Charlie Pate, who smiled as the cars sped away.

6:00 A.M.

Tommy Watson rode his bicycle down the sidewalk in the Greenlawn district. He'd heard

about the murders and the dispatcher at the *Daily Informer* explained why the former boy quit the route. He parked his bike in front of the Woodrow house and placed the paper in the mailbox rack. From there he went to the Pates' residence and did the same. They were the only two customers on the cul-de-sac. Maybe someone would buy a couple of the empty houses and he'd get more business.

6:30 A.M.

An alarm clock sounded the time. Aletha Woodrow sat up in bed and silenced the clock with a finger. She'd had the best night of sleep in years; it felt great to be alive. She stretched her arms wide and yawned, jumped out of bed, and headed for the shower. It was Friday, payday. She would skip lunch and buy a new dress, maybe two new dresses. Soon she'd have to start selecting the wedding trousseau.

The newspapers had another field day with the Greenlawn incident. Only this time with good news. Lieutenant Conroy was a hero, a genius. He had single-handedly figured out the mystery and captured the murderer.

Larry smiled. He'd probably be promoted to captain, given a commendation from the

mayor, and get a healthy raise in pay. He'd need it. In a few weeks he and Aletha would be married, honeymooning in Hawaii, returning stateside a month later to take up residence in quiet, peaceful Greenlawn.

7:00 A.M.

"Breakfast's ready!" Nancy shouted from the bottom of the stairs. Charlie heard her call, but he continued lying in bed, hands behind his head. He stared at the ceiling, thinking.

What had been accomplished in the long run with the use of his robot? Charlie recounted the events of the last few days. Joseph Gordon would never again mow the lawn early in the morning. Tom and Judy Ferguson no longer needed clothes where they were. Agatha Jones had finally lost weight, but hadn't gotten any

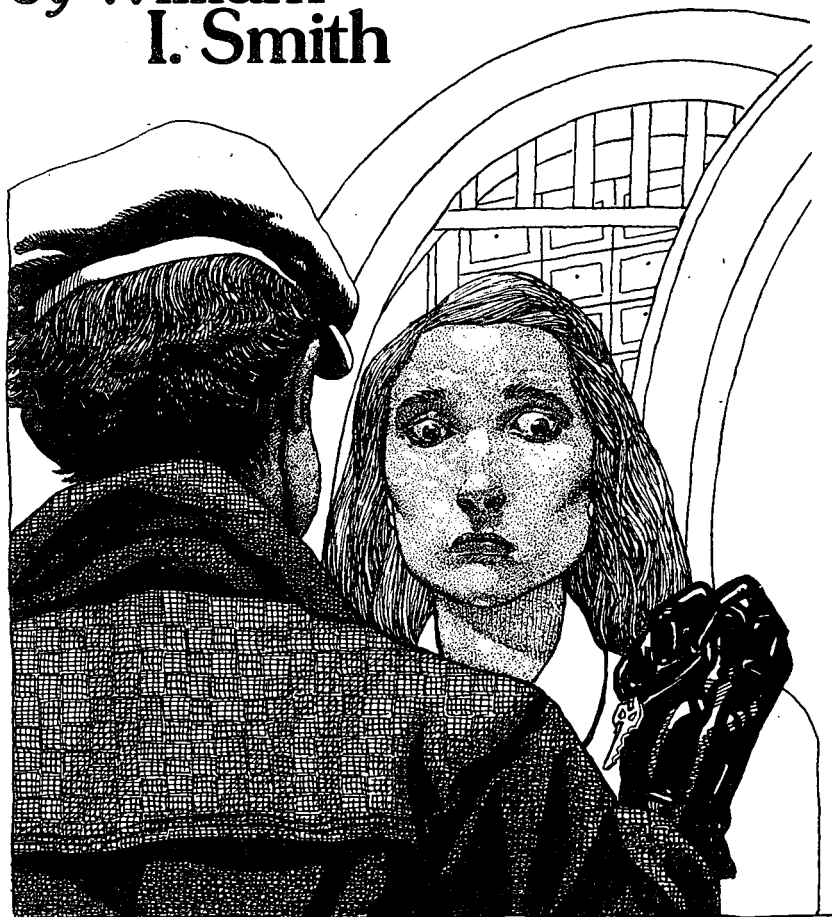
more attractive. Aletha Woodrow had a new lease on life and would be getting married soon. She would discover whether marriage was preferable to single life. If not, she could commit suicide later. The pinscher was worm food by now. Simon Johnson would probably plead guilty to all the murders and begin writing a book, enjoying his new-found fame. His wife, although dead, was probably better off than living with him. And he and Nancy might be expecting their first child. When the baby was born, Charlie would have to make something for its first toy. Maybe a small robot.

What more could a man want than what Charlie Pate had? A beautiful wife, a good job, and a quiet neighborhood to live in. Perhaps it was too quiet now. Maybe—just maybe—it was time to move again.

FICTION

George and the Safety Box Lady

by William
I. Smith



“A l is a nice man,” I said. “He came to Mama’s funeral. He said it showed respect. For Mama. And for Dad. Al and Dad, they started out together, you know. And even for me. Can you imagine, respect for me?”

The safety box lady was looking at me a little puzzled like people do when I get to talking. Usually I don’t talk much, but when I get going, like Mama used to say, I would go round and round the subject till I finally closed in on it.

Right here a lady came in wanting to get in her safety box. The lady wrote her name and box number on the little card; and the safety box lady took it to the file, checked it out, wrote something down on the card she had checked it out on, and she and the lady went back into the vault where the safety boxes are.

I just stood there watching the fourth row of safety boxes in the vault, which was all I had to watch. Once the safety box lady walked out, casual, to see what I was doing. She had started to look a little worried now.

“What do you want, Mr. . . . ?” she asked me when the other lady had left, and the safety box lady had gotten back to the counter you can’t get through until she pushes the button.

“George,” I said. “Everybody just calls me George. They used to call me Rocky before the movies started. Guess I’m not a hero. But I did have thirty-seven fights and I won thirty of them. But you don’t want to hear about that; that was a long time ago, and Mama says you are getting old when all you talk about is a long time ago.”

The safety box lady was pretty, not flashy like the ladies that hang around the club, but fresh-looking with a lot of soft blonde, kind of careless hair. By now she should have been getting impatient with me, but she wasn’t. She was working too hard trying to keep from looking worried. And scared. But she wasn’t going near the place to push the buzzer that calls the guard, because I know where that is, too.

“People usually think I am kind of stupid,” I said. “But I’m not. Not really. I just think a little different. Of course I’m not smart either, not like Mr. Cole. He takes care of all the money for Al. We were just in here a little while ago, remember?”

“Yes,” the safety box lady said. “I remember.” She had a little trouble saying it.

“We come in once, maybe two times a month,” I said. “To cut out the coupons on all the bonds. They are like money, you know. The

coupons. And the bonds too. Whoever has them, they can put them in the bank just like money. They aren't, registered I think the word is, to anybody."

"Oh?" The safety box lady was trying to look like I was telling her all sorts of interesting things, things that she had never heard about before.

"But even if they aren't registered to anybody," I said, "I'll bet they got numbers on them, or something, that a guy with Al's connections could trace if he wanted to."

The safety box lady didn't know what to do. She was holding her hands together to try to keep them still.

"You know," I said, "I count things. I count how many blocks I walk, and which way, so I don't get lost. Mr. Cole's smart, he don't have to count little things, except maybe sometimes he should."

"What do you mean?" the safety box lady asked, holding her hands tighter than ever.

"What I mean is Al's safety box back there." I pointed to the row of safety boxes you could see from where we were standing. "Al's box is the third box in the fourth row from the bottom."

The safety box lady was looking at me like I was a snake and she was a bird. I didn't like that. I don't want to be a snake.

"Well, you see, the thing is," I said, "when you took the box out and gave it to Mr. Cole, that is where you took it out from. Then me and Mr. Cole, we went back to the little room just like always. And Mr. Cole goes inside to cut out the coupons, and I stand outside to see that everything's okay."

"But when we come back," I said when the safety box lady did not say anything, "you put the box back in the third row this time instead of the fourth row where it belongs."

"You must have counted wrong," the safety box lady said. She tried to say it real strong, and she did pretty good, too.

"No." I said. "I haven't had too long to think on it, so maybe I haven't got it all, but what you must have done was rent your own safety box next to Al's—or better yet have someone rent it for you. Then when me and Mr. Cole was back in the room, you close Al's box and open yours. When we come back, we put Al's box in your place."

"How could I do that?" the safety box lady asked. "You took your key with you. I couldn't close your box without your key."

"You switched keys," I said. "I done something like that once and I made a lot of money. And I wish you could make a lot of money too. I . . ."

"Switched keys!" The safety box lady was trying to get mad now, but it was too late.

"Sure," I said. "You open up Al's box with Al's key, then you palm the key and give Mr. Cole your key. Then, when we come back, you've got your box open with your key. You get two keys when you rent you a safety box in case you lose one of them, you know. So you've got your box place open and Al's box place shut. Gee, that sounds funny. So you put Al's box in your box place. Then you give Mr. Cole back Al's key. Maybe I haven't got it quite right because I'm not smart like Mr. Cole, but I bet if we went back there right now and opened up Al's box, we would find it empty. Or at least we wouldn't find it all full of the bonds Mr. Cole cuts the coupons off of. What do you bet?"

"You know," I said when the safety box lady didn't say anything, "I told you Al was a nice man. That's not true. Al can act nice, he can do nice things like going to Mama's funeral; but he isn't nice. Al's mean, and if you took his bonds he'd be looking for you for the rest of his life. Only he wouldn't really because he'd find you the first time you tried selling those bonds, or cutting out those coupons and putting them in the bank. And I will not even tell you what he would do to you."

"I . . ." The safety box lady was looking at me the way Mama did when I told her Dad was dead.

"And don't ask me to come along with you and we could share it," I said. "I thought about that too. And I'm pretty lonely since Mama died, and it would be nice. But not for long. Maybe I could hide better than you, but I couldn't hide good enough. So maybe you should go away somewhere. And maybe you could try this on someone else."

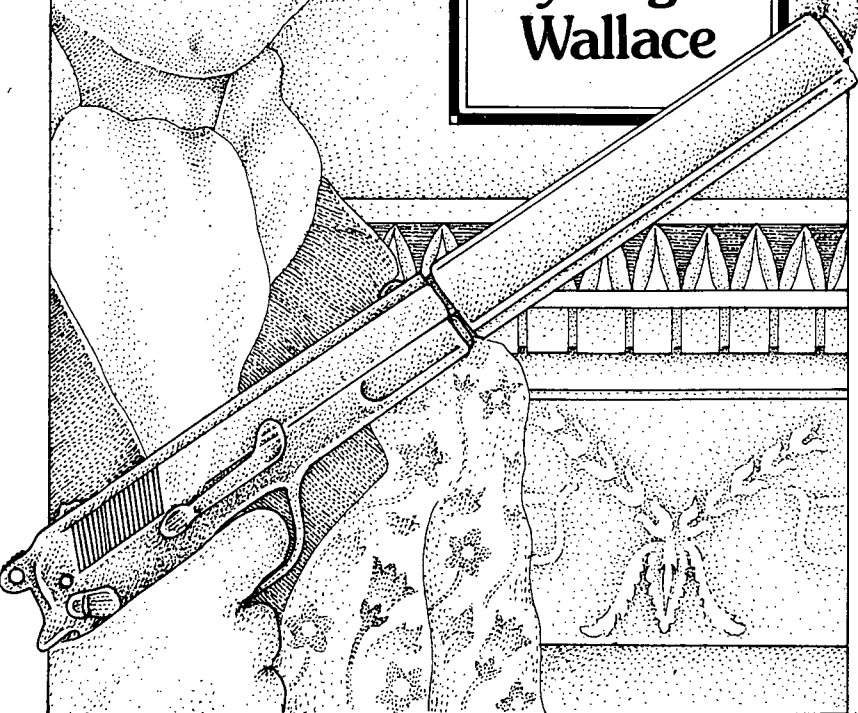
Me and the safety box lady, we looked at each other for a long time. Finally I said, "Come on; you can use your key an' I can use Al's key, which I happen to have taken out of Mr. Cole's pocket when he was busy thinking, and we can just both go put those safety boxes back where they should be. And then we can pretend none of this ever happened."

And do you know, that's what we did.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Treasure Hunt

by Edgar
Wallace



There is a tradition in criminal circles that even the humblest of detective officers is a man of wealth and substance, and that his secret hoard was secured by thieving, bribery, and blackmail. It is the gossip of the fields, the quarries, the tailor's shop, the laundry, and the bakehouse of fifty county prisons and three convict establishments, that all highly placed detectives have by nefarious means laid up for themselves sufficient earthly treasures to make work a hobby and their official pittance the most inconsiderable portion of their incomes.

Since Mr. J. G. Reeder had for over twenty years dealt exclusively with bank robbers and forgers, who are the aristocrats and capitalists of the underworld, legend credited him with country houses and immense secret reserves. Not that he would have a great deal of money in the bank. It was admitted that he was too clever to risk discovery by the authorities. No, it was hidden somewhere: it was the pet dream of hundreds of unlawful men that they would some day discover the hoard and live happily ever after. The one satisfactory aspect of his affluence (they all agreed) was that, being an old man—he was over fifty—he couldn't take his money with him, for gold melts at a certain temperature and gilt-edged stock is seldom printed on asbestos paper.

The Director of Public Prosecutions was lunching one Saturday at his club with a judge of the King's Bench—Saturday being one of the two days in the week when a judge gets properly fed. And the conversation drifted to a certain Mr. J. G. Reeder, the chief of the director's sleuths.

"He's capable," he confessed reluctantly, "but I hate his hat. It is the sort that So-and-so used to wear," he mentioned by name an eminent politician; "and I loathe his black frock-coat, people who see him coming into the office think he's a coroner's officer, but he's capable. His side-whiskers are an abomination, and I have a feeling that, if I talked rough to him, he would burst into tears—a gentle soul. Almost too gentle for my kind of work. He apologizes to the messenger every time he rings for him!"

The judge, who knew something about humanity, answered with a frosty smile.

"He sounds rather like a potential murderer to me," he said cynically.

Here, in his extravagance, he did Mr. J. G. Reeder an injustice, for Mr. Reeder was incapable of breaking the law—quite. At the same time there were many people who formed an altogether wrong

conception of J. G.'s harmlessness as an individual. And one of these was a certain Lew Kohl, who mixed bank note printing with elementary burglary.

Threatened men live long, a trite saying but, like most things trite, true. In a score of cases, when Mr. J. G. Reeder had descended from the witness stand, he had met the baleful eye of the man in the dock and had listened with mild interest to divers promises as to what would happen to him in the near or the remote future. For he was a great authority on forged bank notes and he had sent many men to penal servitude.

Mr. Reeder, that inoffensive man, had seen prisoners foaming at the mouth in their rage, he had seen them white and livid, he had heard their howling execrations and he had met these men after their release from prison and had found them amiable souls half ashamed and half amused at their nearly forgotten outbursts and horrific threats.

But when, in the early part of 1914, Lew Kohl was sentenced for ten years, he neither screamed his imprecations nor registered a vow to tear Mr. Reeder's heart, lungs, and important organs from his frail body.

Lew just smiled and his eyes caught the detective's for the space of a second—the forger's eyes were pale blue and speculative, and they held neither hate nor fury. Instead, they said in so many words:

"At the first opportunity I will kill you."

Mr. Reeder read the message and sighed heavily, for he disliked fuss of all kinds, and resented, insofar as he could resent anything, the injustice of being made personally responsible for the performance of a public duty.

Many years had passed, and considerable changes had occurred in Mr. Reeder's fortune. He had transferred from the specialized occupation of detecting the makers of forged bank notes to the more general practice of the public prosecutor's bureau, but he never forgot Lew's smile.

The work in Whitehall was not heavy and it was very interesting. To Mr. Reeder came most of the anonymous letters which the director received in shoals. In the main they were self-explanatory, and it required no particular intelligence to discover their motive. Jealousy, malice, plain mischief-making, and occasionally a sordid desire to benefit financially by the information which was conveyed, were behind the majority. But occasionally:

Sir James is going to marry his cousin, and it's not three months since his poor wife fell overboard from the Channel steamer crossing to Calais. There's something very fishy about this business. Miss Margaret doesn't like him, for she knows he's after her money. Why was I sent away to London that night? He doesn't like driving in the dark, either. It's strange that he wanted to drive that night when it was raining like blazes.

This particular letter was signed "A Friend." Justice has many such friends.

"Sir James" was Sir James Tithermite, who had been a director of some new public department during the war and had received a baronetcy for his services.

"Look it up," said the director when he saw the letter. "I seem to remember that Lady Tithermite was drowned at sea."

"On the nineteenth of December last year," said Mr. Reeder solemnly. "She and Sir James were going to Monte Carlo, breaking their journey in Paris. Sir James, who has a house near Maidstone, drove to Dover, garaging the car at the Lord Wilson Hotel. The night was stormy and the ship had a rough crossing—they were halfway across when Sir James came to the purser and said that he had missed his wife. Her baggage was in the cabin, her passport, rail ticket, and hat, but the lady was not found, indeed was never seen again."

The director nodded.

"I see, you've read up the case."

"I remember it," said Mr. Reeder. "The case is a favorite speculation of mine. Unfortunately, I see evil in everything and I have often thought how easy—but I fear that I take a warped view of life. It is a horrible handicap to possess a criminal mind."

The director looked at him suspiciously. He was never quite sure whether Mr. Reeder was serious. At that moment his sobriety was beyond challenge.

"A discharged chauffeur wrote that letter, of course," he began.

"Thomas Dayford, of 179 Barrack Street, Maidstone," concluded Mr. Reeder. "He is at present in the employ of the Kent Motor-Bus Company, and has three children, two of whom are twins and bonny little rascals."

The chief laughed helplessly.

"I'll take it that you *know*!" he said. "See what there is behind

the letter. Sir James is a big fellow in Kent, a justice of the peace, and he has powerful political influences. There is nothing in this letter, of course. Go warily, Reeder—if any kick comes back to this office, it goes on to you—intensified!”

Mr. Reeder's idea of walking warily was peculiarly his own. He traveled down to Maidstone the next morning, and, finding a bus that passed the lodge gates of Elfreda Manor, he journeyed comfortably and economically, his umbrella between his knees. He passed through the lodge gates, up a long and winding avenue of poplars, and presently came within sight of the grey manor house.

In a deep chair on the lawn he saw a girl sitting, a book on her knees, and evidently she saw him, for she rose as he crossed the lawn and came towards him eagerly.

“I'm Miss Margaret Letherby—are you from—?” She mentioned the name of a well-known firm of lawyers, and her face fell when Mr. Reeder regretfully disclaimed connection with those legal lights.

She was as pretty as a perfect complexion and a round, not too intellectual, face could, in combination, make her.

“I thought—do you wish to see Sir James? He is in the library. If you ring, one of the maids will take you to him.”

Had Mr. Reeder been the sort of man who could be puzzled by anything, he would have been puzzled by the suggestion that any girl with money of her own should marry a man much older than herself against her own wishes. There was little mystery in the matter now. Miss Margaret would have married any strong-willed man who insisted.

“Even me,” said Mr. Reeder to himself, with a certain melancholy pleasure.

There was no need to ring the bell. A tall, broad man in a golfing suit stood in the doorway. His fair hair was long and hung over his forehead in a thick flat strand; a heavy, tawny mustache hid his mouth and swept down over a chin that was long and powerful.

“Well?” he asked aggressively.

“I'm from the public prosecutor's office,” murmured Mr. Reeder. “I have had an anonymous letter.”

His pale eyes did not leave the face of the other man.

“Come in,” said Sir James gruffly.

As he closed the door he glanced quickly first to the girl and then to the poplar avenue.

“I'm expecting a fool of a lawyer,” he said, as he flung open the door of what was evidently the library.

His voice was steady; not by a flicker of eyelash had he betrayed the slightest degree of anxiety when Reeder had told his mission.

"Well—what about this anonymous letter? You don't take much notice of that kind of trash, do you?"

Mr. Reeder deposited his umbrella and flat-crowned hat on a chair before he took a document from his pocket and handed it to the baronet, who frowned as he read. Was it Mr. Reeder's vivid imagination, or did the hard light in the eyes of Sir James soften as he read?

"This is a cock-and-bull story of somebody having seen my wife's jewelry on sale in Paris," he said. "There is nothing to it. I can account for every one of my poor wife's trinkets. I brought back the jewel case after that awful night. I don't recognize the handwriting: who is the lying scoundrel who wrote this?"

Mr. Reeder had never before been called a lying scoundrel, but he accepted the experience with admirable meekness.

"I thought it untrue," he said, shaking his head. "I followed the details of the case very thoroughly. You left here in the afternoon—"

"At night," said the other, brusquely. He was not inclined to discuss the matter, but Mr. Reeder's appealing look was irresistible. "It is only eighty minutes' run to Dover. We got to the pier at eleven o'clock, about the same time as the boat train, and we went on board at once. I got my cabin key from the purser and put her ladyship and her baggage inside."

"Her ladyship was a good sailor?"

"Yes, a very good sailor; she was remarkably well that night. I left her in the cabin dozing, and went for a stroll on the deck—"

"Raining very heavily and a strong sea running," nodded Reeder, as though in agreement with something the other man had said.

"Yes—I'm a pretty good sailor—anyway, that story about my poor wife's jewels is utter nonsense. You can tell the director that, with my compliments."

He opened the door for his visitor, and Mr. Reeder was some time replacing the letter and gathering his belongings.

"You have a beautiful place here, Sir James—a lovely place. An extensive estate?"

"Three thousand acres." This time he did not attempt to disguise his impatience. "Good afternoon."

Mr. Reeder went slowly down the drive, his remarkable memory at work.

He missed the bus which he could easily have caught, and pur-

sued an apparently aimless way along the winding road which marched with the boundaries of the baronet's property. A walk of a quarter of a mile brought him to a lane shooting off at right angles from the main road, and marking, he guessed, the southern boundary. At the corner stood an old stone lodge, on the inside of a forbidding iron gate. The lodge was in a pitiable state of neglect and disrepair. Tiles had been dislodged from the roof, the windows were grimy or broken, and the little garden was overrun with docks and thistles. Beyond the gate was a narrow, weed-covered drive that trailed out of sight into a distant plantation.

Hearing the clang of a letter box closing, he turned to see a postman mounting his bicycle.

"What place is this?" asked Mr. Reeder, arresting the postman's departure.

"South Lodge—Sir James Tithermite's property. It's never used now. Hasn't been used for years—I don't know why: it's a short cut if they happen to be coming this way."

Mr. Reeder walked with him towards the village, and he was a skillful pumper of wells, however dry; and the postman was not dry by any means.

"Yes, poor lady! She was very frail—one of those sort of invalids that last out many a healthy man."

Mr. Reeder put a question at random and scored most unexpectedly.

"Yes, her ladyship was a bad sailor. I know because every time she went abroad she used to get a bottle of that stuff people take for seasickness. I've delivered many a bottle till Raikes the chemist stocked it—'Pickers' Travellers' Friend,' that's what it was called. Mr. Raikes was only saying to me the other day that he'd got half a dozen bottles on hand, and he didn't know what to do with them. Nobody in Climbury ever goes to sea."

Mr. Reeder went on to the village and idled his precious time in most unlikely places. At the chemist's, at the blacksmith's shop, at the modest building-yard. He caught the last bus back to Maidstone, and by great good luck the last train to London.

And, in his vague way, he answered the director's query the next day with:

"Yes, I saw Sir James: a very interesting man."

This was on the Friday. All day Saturday he was busy. The Sabbath brought him a new interest.

On this bright Sunday morning, Mr. Reeder, attired in a flowered

dressing gown, his feet encased in black velvet slippers, stood at the window of his house in Bröckley Road and surveyed the deserted thoroughfare. The bell of a local church, which was accounted high, had rung for early Mass, and there was nothing living in sight except a black cat that lay asleep in a patch of sunlight on the top step of the house opposite. The hour was seven thirty, and Mr. Reeder had been at his desk since six, working by artificial light, the month being October, towards the close.

From the half-moon of the window he regarded a section of the Lewisham High Road and as much of Tanners Hill as can be seen before it dips past the railway bridge into sheer Deptford.

Returning to his table, he opened a carton of the cheapest cigarettes and, lighting one, puffed in an amateurish fashion. He smoked cigarettes rather like a woman who detests them but feels that it is the correct thing to do.

"Dear me," said Mr. Reeder feebly.

He was back at the window, and he had seen a man turn out of Lewisham High Road. He had crossed the road and was coming straight to Daffodil House—which frolicsome name appeared on the doorposts of Mr. Reeder's residence. A tall, straight man, with a sombre brown face, he came to the front gate, passed through and beyond the watcher's range of vision.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Reeder as he heard the tinkle of a bell.

A few minutes later his housekeeper tapped on the door.

"Will you see Mr. Kohl, sir?" she asked. Mr. J. G. Reeder nodded.

Lew Kohl walked into the room to find a middle-aged man in a flamboyant dressing gown sitting at his desk, a pair of pince-nez set crookedly on his nose.

"Good morning, Kohl."

Lew Kohl looked at the man who had sent him to seven and a half years of hell, and the corner of his thin lips curled.

"Morning, Mr. Reeder." His eyes flashed across the almost bare surface of the writing desk on which Reeder's hands were lightly clasped. "You didn't expect to see me, I guess?"

"Not so early," said Reeder in his hushed voice, "but I should have remembered that early rising is one of the good habits which are inculcated by penal servitude." He said this in the manner of one bestowing praise for good conduct.

"I suppose you've got a pretty good idea of why I have come, eh? I'm a bad forgetter, Reeder, and a man in Dartmoor has time to think."

The older man lifted his sandy eyebrows, the steel-rimmed glasses on his nose slipped farther askew.

"That phrase seems familiar," he said, and the eyebrows lowered in a frown. "Now let me think—it was in a melodrama, of course, but was it *Souls in Harness* or *The Marriage Vow*?"

He appeared genuinely anxious for assistance in solving this problem.

"This is going to be a different kind of play," said the long-faced Lew through his teeth. "I'm going to get you, Reeder—you can go along and tell your boss, the public prosecutor. But I'll get you sweet! There will be no evidence to swing me. And I'll get that nice little stocking of yours, Reeder!"

The legend of Reeder's fortune was accepted even by so intelligent a man as Kohl.

"You'll get my stocking! Dear me, I shall have to go barefooted," said Mr. Reeder, with a faint show of humor.

"You know what I mean—think that over. Some hour and day you'll go out, and all Scotland Yard won't catch me for the killing! I've thought it out—"

"One has time to think in Dartmoor," murmured Mr. J. G. Reeder encouragingly. "You're becoming one of the world's thinkers, Kohl. Do you know Rodin's masterpiece—a beautiful statue throbbing with life—"

"That's all." Lew Kohl rose, the smile still trembling at the corner of his mouth. "Maybe you'll turn this over in your mind, and in a day or two you won't be feeling so gay."

Reeder's face was pathetic in its sadness. His untidy sandy-grey hair seemed to be standing on end; the large ears, that stood out at right angles to his face, gave the illusion of quivering movement.

Lew Kohl's hand was on the doorknob.

"Womp!"

It was the sound of a dull weight striking a board; something winged past his cheek, before his eyes a deep hole showed in the wall, and his face was stung by flying grains of plaster. He spun round with a whine of rage.

Mr. Reeder had a long-barrelled Browning in his hand, with a barrel-shaped silencer over the muzzle, and he was staring at the weapon open-mouthed.

"Now how on earth did that happen?" he asked in wonder.

Lew Kohl stood trembling with rage and fear, his face yellow-white. "You—you swine!" he breathed. "You tried to shoot me!"

Mr. Reeder stared at him over his glasses.

"Good gracious—you think that? Still thinking of killing me, Kohl?"

Kohl tried to speak but found no words, and, flinging open the door, he strode down the stairs and through the front entrance. His foot was on the first step when something came hurtling past him and crashed to fragments at his feet. It was a large stone vase that had decorated the windowsill of Mr. Reeder's bedroom. Leaping over the debris of stone and flower-mould, he glared up into the surprised face of Mr. J. G. Reeder.

"I'll get you!" he spluttered.

"I hope you're not hurt?" asked the man at the window in a tone of concern. "These things happen. Some day and some hour—"

As Lew Kohl strode down the street, the detective was still talking.

Mr. Stan Bride was at his morning ablutions when his friend and sometime prison associate came into the little room that overlooked Fitzroy Square.

Stan Bride, who bore no resemblance to anything virginal, being a stout and stumpy man with a huge red face and many chins, stopped in the act of drying himself and gazed over the edge of the towel.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked sharply. "You look as if you'd been chased by a busy. What did you go out so early for?"

Lew told him, and the jovial countenance of his roommate grew longer and longer.

"You poor fish!" he hissed. "To go after Reeder with that stuff! Don't you think he was waiting for you? Do you suppose he didn't know the very moment you left the Moor?"

"I've scared him, anyway," said the other, and Mr. Bride laughed.

"Good scout!" he sneered. "Scare that old person!" (He did not say "person.") "If he's as white as you, he *is* scared! But he's not. Of course he shot past you—if he'd wanted to shoot you, you'd have been stiff by now. But he didn't. Thinker, eh—he's given you somep'n' to think about."

"Where that gun came from I don't—"

There was a knock at the door and the two men exchanged glances.

"Who's there?" asked Bride, and a familiar voice answered.

"It's that busy from the Yard," whispered Bride, and opened the door.

The "busy" was Sergeant Allford, C.I.D., an affable and portly man and a detective of some promise.

"Morning, boys—not been to church, Stan?"

Stan grinned politely.

"How's trade, Lew?"

"Not so bad." The forger was alert, suspicious.

"Come to see you about a gun—got an idea you're carrying one, Lew—Colt automatic R 7/94318. That's not right, Lew—guns don't belong to this country."

"I've got no gun," said Lew sullenly.

Bride had suddenly become an old man, for he also was a convict on license, and the discovery might send him back to serve his unfinished sentence.

"Will you come a little walk to the station, or will you let me go over you?"

"Go over me," said Lew, and put out his arms stiffly whilst the detective rubbed him down.

"I'll have a look round," said the detective, and his "look round" was very thorough.

"Must have been mistaken," said Sergeant Allford. And then, suddenly: "Was that what you chucked into the river as you were walking along the Embankment?"

Lew started. It was the first intimation he had received that he had been "tailed" that morning.

Bride waited till the detective was visible from the window crossing Fitzroy Square; then he turned in a fury on his companion.

"Clever, ain't you! That old hound knew you had a gun—knew the number. And if Allford had found it you'd have been 'dragged' and me too!"

"I threw it in the river," said Lew sulkily.

"Brains—not many but some!" said Bride, breathing heavily. "You cut out Reeder—he's hell and poison, and if you don't know it you're deaf! Scared him? You big stiff! He'd cut your throat and write a hymn about it."

"I didn't know they were tailing me," growled Kohl; "but I'll get him! And his money, too."

"Get him from another lodging," said Bride curtly. "A crook I don't mind, being one; a murderer I don't mind, but a talking jackass makes me sick. Get his stuff if you can—I'll bet it's all invested in real estate, and you can't lift houses—but don't talk about it. I like you, Lew, up to a point; you're miles before the point

and out of sight. I don't like Reeder—I don't like snakes, but I keep away from the zoo."

So Lew Kohl went into new diggings on the top floor of an Italian's house in Dean Street, and here he had leisure and inclination to brood upon his grievances and to plan afresh the destruction of his enemy. And new plans were needed, for the schemes which had seemed so watertight in the quietude of a Devonshire cell showed daylight through many crevices.

Lew's homicidal urge had undergone considerable modification. He had been experimented upon by a very clever psychologist—though he never regarded Mr. Reeder in this light, and, indeed, had the vaguest idea as to what the word meant. But there were other ways of hurting Reeder, and his mind fell constantly back to the drama of discovering this peccant detective's hidden treasure.

It was nearly a week later that Mr. Reeder invited himself into the director's private sanctum, and that great official listened spell-bound while his subordinate offered his outrageous theory about Sir James Tithermite and his dead wife. When Mr. Reeder had finished, the director pushed back his chair from the table.

"My dear man," he said, a little irritably, "I can't possibly give a warrant on the strength of your surmises—not even a search warrant. The story is so fantastic, so incredible, that it would be more at home in the pages of a sensational story than in a public prosecutor's report."

"It was a wild night, and yet Lady Tithermite was not ill," suggested the detective gently. "That is a fact to remember, sir."

The director shook his head.

"I can't do it—not on the evidence," he said. "I should raise a storm that'd swing me into Whitehall. Can't you do anything—unofficially?"

Mr. Reeder shook his head.

"My presence in the neighbourhood has been remarked," he said primly. "I think it would be impossible to—er—cover up my traces. And yet I have located the place, and could tell you within a few inches—"

Again the director shook his head.

"No, Reeder," he said quietly, "the whole thing is sheer deduction on your part. Oh, yes, I know you have a criminal mind—I think you have told me that before. And that is a good reason why I should not issue a warrant. You're simply crediting this unfortun-

ate man with your ingenuity. Nothing doing!"

Mr. Reeder sighed and went back to his bureau, not entirely despondent, for there had intruded a new element into his investigations.

Mr. Reeder had been to Maidstone several times during the week, and he had not gone alone; though seemingly unconscious of the fact that he had developed a shadow, for he had seen Lew Kohl on several occasions, and had spent an uncomfortable few minutes wondering whether his experiments had failed.

On the second occasion an idea had developed in the detective's mind, and if he were a laughing man he would have chuckled aloud when he slipped out of Maidstone station one evening and, in the act of hiring a cab, had seen Lew Kohl negotiating for another.

Mr. Bride was engaged in the tedious but necessary practice of so cutting a pack of cards that the ace of diamonds remained at the bottom, when his former co-lodger burst in upon him, and there was a light of triumph in Lew's cold eyes which brought Mr. Bride's heart to his boots.

"I've got him!" said Lew.

Bride put aside the cards and stood up.

"Got who?" he asked coldly. "And if it's killing, you needn't answer, but get out!"

"There's no killing."

Lew sat down squarely at the table, his hands in his pockets, a real smile on his face.

"I've been trailing Reeder for a week, and that fellow wants some trailing!"

"Well?" asked the other, when he paused dramatically.

"I've found his stocking!"

Bride scratched his chin, and was half convinced.

"You never have?"

Lew nodded.

"He's been going to Maidstone a lot lately, and driving to a little village about five miles out. There I always lost him. But the other night, when he came back to the station to catch the last train, he slipped into the waiting room and I found a place where I could watch him. What do you think he did?"

Mr. Bride hazarded no suggestion.

"He opened his bag," said Lew impressively, "and took out a wad of notes as thick as that! He'd been drawing on his bank! I trailed him up to London. There's a restaurant on the station and he went

in to get a cup of coffee, with me keeping well out of his sight. As he came out of the restaurant he took out his handkerchief and wiped his mouth. He didn't see the little book that dropped, but I did. I was scared sick that somebody else would see it, or that he'd wait long enough to find it himself. But he went out of the station and I got that book before you could say 'knife.' Look!"

It was a well-worn little notebook, covered with faded red morocco. Bride put out his hand to take it.

"Wait a bit," said Lew. "Are you in this with me fifty-fifty, because I want some help?"

Bride hesitated.

"If it's just plain thieving, I'm with you," he said.

"Plain thieving—and sweet," said Lew exultantly, and pushed the book across the table.

For the greater part of the night they sat together talking in low tones, discussing impartially the methodical bookkeeping of Mr. J. G. Reeder and his exceeding dishonesty.

The Monday night was wet. A storm blew up from the southwest, and the air was filled with falling leaves as Lew and his companion footed the five miles which separated them from the village. Neither carried any impedimenta that was visible, yet under Lew's waterproof coat was a kit of tools of singular ingenuity, and Mr. Bride's coat pockets were weighted down with the sections of a powerful jemmy.

They met nobody in their walk, and the church bell was striking eleven when Lew gripped the bars of the South Lodge gates, pulled himself up to the top and dropped lightly on the other side. He was followed by Mr. Bride, who, in spite of his bulk, was a singularly agile man. The ruined lodge showed in the darkness, and they passed through the creaking gates to the door and Lew flashed his lantern upon the keyhole before he began manipulation with the implements which he had taken from his kit.

The door was opened in ten minutes and a few seconds later they stood in a low-roofed little room, the principal feature of which was a deep, grateless fireplace. Lew took off his mackintosh and stretched it over the window before he spread the light in his lamp, and, kneeling down, brushed the debris from the hearth, examining the joints of the big stone carefully.

"This work's been botched," he said. "Anybody could see that."

He put the claw of the jemmy into a crack and levered up the stone, and it moved slightly. Stopping only to dig a deeper crevice

with a chisel and hammer, he thrust the claw of the jemmy farther down. The stone came up above the edge of the floor and Bride slipped the chisel underneath.

"Now together," grunted Lew.

They got their fingers beneath the hearthstone and with one heave hinged it up. Lew picked up the lamp, and, kneeling down, flashed a light into the dark cavity. And then:

"Oh, my God," he shrieked.

A second later two terrified men rushed from the house into the drive. And a miracle had happened, for the gates were open and a dark figure stood squarely before them.

"Put up your hands, Kohl!" said a voice and, hateful as it was to Lew Kohl, he could have fallen on the neck of Mr. Reeder.

At twelve o'clock that night Sir James Tithermite was discussing matters with his bride-to-be: the stupidity of her lawyer, who wished to safeguard her fortune, and his own cleverness and foresight in securing complete freedom of action for the girl who was to be his wife.

"These blackguards think of nothing but their fees," he began, when his footman came in unannounced, and behind him the chief constable of the county and a man he remembered seeing before.

"Sir James Tithermite?" said the chief constable unnecessarily, for he knew Sir James very well.

"Yes, colonel, what is it?" asked the baronet, his face twitching.

"I am taking you into custody on a charge of wilfully murdering your wife, Eleanor Mary Tithermite."

"The whole thing turned upon the question as to whether Lady Tithermite was a good or a bad sailor," explained J. G. Reeder to his chief. "If she were a bad sailor, it was unlikely that she would be on the ship, even for five minutes, without calling for the stewardess. The stewardess did not see her ladyship, nor did anybody on board, for the simple reason that she was not on board! She was murdered within the grounds of the manor; her body was buried beneath the hearthstone of the old lodge, and Sir James continued his journey by car to Dover, handing over his packages to a porter and telling him to take them to his cabin before he returned to put the car into the hotel garage. He had timed his arrival so that he passed on board with a crowd of passengers from the boat train, and nobody knew whether he was alone or whether he was accompanied, and, for the matter of that, nobody cared. The purser gave

him his key, and he put the baggage, including his wife's hat, into the cabin, paid the porter and dismissed him. Officially, Lady Tithermite was on board, for he surrendered her ticket to the collector and received her landing voucher. And then he discovered she had disappeared. The ship was searched, but, of course, the unfortunate lady was not found. As I remarked before—"

"You have a criminal mind," said the director good-humoredly. "Go on, Reeder."

"Having this queer and objectionable trait, I saw how very simple a matter it was to give the illusion that the lady was on board, and I decided that, if the murder was committed, it must have been within a few miles of the house. And then the local builder told me that he had given Sir James a little lesson in the art of mixing mortar. And the local blacksmith told me that the gate had been damaged, presumably by Sir James's car—I had seen the broken rods and all I wanted to know was when the repairs were effected. That she was beneath the hearth in the lodge I was certain. Without a search warrant it was impossible to prove or disprove my theory, and I myself could not conduct a private investigation without risking the reputation of our department—if I may say 'our,' " he said apologetically.

The director was thoughtful.

"Of course, you induced this man Kohl to dig up the hearth by pretending you had money buried there. I presume you revealed that fact in your notebook? But why on earth did he imagine that you had a hidden treasure?"

Mr. Reeder smiled sadly.

"The criminal mind is a peculiar thing," he said, with a sigh. "It harbors illusions and fairy stories. Fortunately, I understand that mind. As I have often said—"

SOLUTION TO THE MARCH "UNSOLVED":

Clark is the druggist, Jones the grocer, Morgan the butcher, and Smith the policeman.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

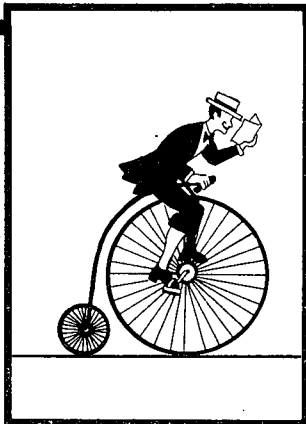


Illustration by Sheila Smith

There are new titles galore from authors who have in the past been profile subjects in this space. Richard Jury makes his eighth appearance in ***I Am the Only Running Footman*** (Little, Brown, \$15.95, 206 pp.) by Martha Grimes. Like the earlier books, the title comes from an inn that plays a role in the book; sidekick Melrose Plant shares the Watson role with Inspector Macalvie, making his second appearance in a Grimes novel. This latest book opens with the strangulation of a young woman with her own scarf; then it skips a year to a repetition of the crime in Jury's territory. Here is Grimes's most complicated plot to date, reflecting her growing maturity and gravity and her tendency to avoid the cute elements that marked her first few titles. At the heart of the plot is a secret tragedy, one that is sheltered and shared by an unusually close upper-crust family; there is a chillingly suspenseful conclusion that should surprise the most astute readers. Richard Jury fans need no encouragement to look for *I Am the Only Running Footman*, but this would make a fine introduction to newcomers.

It's been several years since Jane Langton treated us to a mystery starring Homer and Mary Kelly. When ***Good and Dead*** opens, the couple has been faithfully attending services in the picturesque Old West Church, in their tiny New England home town. The church is the center of this collection of tales of parishioners, sev-

eral involving Homer's investigative abilities, others not demanding anyone's detecting. There's Ed Bell, whom everyone acknowledges as "a saint," who may be just helping some terminally ill neighbors go out on their own terms. Then there's Betsy Bucky, who appears to be literally *feeding* her husband to death; and the tragedy of the new young minister, whose wife's health is failing so rapidly; and the infatuation of Ed's teenage daughter for a young back yard mechanic; and the disappearance of Arlene Potts, whose beloved garden seems unaccountably dug up in one spot. This book is as unconventional as its quintessential Yankee hero, Homer. Langton has gone for mood and milieu over standard mystery fare, nimbly juxtaposing the concerns of the parishioners with quotes from early American sermons, and illustrating the novel with her charming pen and ink sketches while salting it with satirical observations on the lives of the pious. (St. Martin's, \$15.95, 241 pp.)

Tony Hillerman's two Native American policemen, Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and Officer Jim Chee, have heretofore both belonged to the Navajo Tribal Police, but each has remained the protagonist in his own set of novels. They work together for the first time in **Skinwalkers**, Hillerman's latest, and fans of both detectives will be pleased with the results. The book's title refers to the Navajo "witch," a Navajo who has abandoned his people's harmonious way of living so that he can assume terrible and terrifying powers over others. Three unsolved reservation murders have appeared to be unrelated and truly mysterious; no one seems to have a motive. Then there's an attempt made on Jim Chee's life, and Leaphorn—who despises the very notion of witchcraft—must face the fact that a witch may be involved. And Officer Chee is not above suspicion himself. This novel is vintage Hillerman. It is controlled, compelling, and saturated with a culture that seems foreign and yet is made understandable by the characters who are part of it. The locale is the southwestern desert, but Hillerman takes his readers to even more exotic places, into the sensibilities of two Navajo policemen. If you have not discovered Hillerman for yourself, *Skinwalkers* (Harper & Row, \$15.95, 224 pp.) offers you the perfect opportunity.

An amateur sleuth who goes professional P.I. in his second novel is recently retired major league outfielder Harvey Blissberg. In **Fadeaway** author Richard Rosen has removed Harvey from the ballpark, sure that he has played his last season—his best season—and quit while he was ahead. His new career as private in-

investigator seems to be very slow in taking off—that is, until he gets a call from the manager of the Boston Celtics. One of their star players has disappeared. The next day a player from the Washington Bullets also disappears. Then both athletes turn up—quite dead—and Harvey Blissberg's career is off to a dramatic start. As the good-natured Harvey digs deep to find a connection between the two murdered players, he finds himself penetrating the past, and threatening to uncover a very dark, very buried secret. Needless to say, it endangers his own life, and ultimately gives him pause when he must face up to the hidden side of the competitive collegiate sports world, a world of fierce loyalties and drugs and comradeship—and even murder. *Fadeaway* presents a fresh milieu, with strong characters, authentic situations, and a thoroughly likable protagonist. (Harper & Row, \$15.95, 264 pp.)

For Charlotte MacLeod fans there's a recent addition to her list of paperbacks. **The Plain Old Man** (Avon \$2.95, 217 pp.) brings the number of Max Bittersohn-Sarah Kelling mysteries up to six in paperback, I believe. Once again it's Sarah's rich and eccentric relatives and her old family friends who provide the entertainment here. This time it's Aunt Emma, producing (and starring in) her annual revival of a Gilbert and Sullivan musical on the stage at Pleasaunce, her New England mansion. The amateur antics on-stage, though, soon are upstaged by the doings offstage: first, the theft of a priceless painting, then the death of one of the cast members. Sarah begins snooping, and is soon joined by her husband, art investigator Max. For those of you who like good clean fun, a lively set of characters and old fashioned, sound plots, I recommend that you sample Charlotte MacLeod.

Another amateur sleuth, of more recent appearance, is the retired Sister Mary Helen of *A Novena for Murder*, penned by real-life Sister Carol Anne O'Marie. Sister Mary Helen may have retired from teaching, but she's very busy in alumnae affairs for the College of Mount St. Francis in San Francisco, which also happens to be the site of her order's Mother House. The workload weighs on her heavily when she abruptly finds herself without Suzanne, her secretary: someone has brutally murdered her. And much to the chagrin of Police Inspectors Kate Murphy and Dennis Gallagher, Sister Mary Helen's curiosity, wit, and instincts about human nature seem to be leading her inexorably deeper into the heart of the murder. There's nothing sentimental or pious about the spunky septuagenarian nun, and her latest case—**Advent of Dying**—is fresh, compelling, and lots of fun. (Delacorte Press, \$14.95, 277 pp.)

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



For the has-been actress Viveca Van Loren, life itself has come to feel like **The Morning After**. When she wakes up one morning after in a strange bed next to a dead man with a knife through his heart, she is a lot less shocked than your ordinary citizen would be. She doesn't think she killed him, but she knows that the cops will find out she once served time—unfairly—after having been accused of attacking her husband with a paring knife. So she takes it on the lam, quickly running into co-star Jeff Bridges, who is working under the hood of his car at just the moment when she desperately needs a ride.

We are not talking about high probability plot structuring here, but something more along the lines of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge allowed for

when he advised the dramatic audience to exercise a "willing suspension of disbelief." Does Viveca Van Loren (Jane Fonda) happen to be a down-on-her-luck lush? Well, Jeff Bridges was an alcoholic for ten years, and is both broke and out of work. Does she need someone tough and resourceful to find out what really happened that night? Well, Bridges is an ex-cop from Bakersfield—a former detective, in fact.

There is a lot to find out and not much to go on. But first things first. Here are two fierce individualists: she a wise-cracking former New Yorker, he a disillusioned, slightly bigoted, wry observer of life's inequities. The two need to do a certain amount of driving together, and to engage in a certain amount of verbal sparring, if they are to fall in love. By that point it has become pretty

clear that she is no murderess. But the only likely solution—that she was set up by the husband from whom she is amicably separated—is simply too pat. Suspicion begins to fall on Bridges. Has he truly been helping Viveca or is he keeping her in a pickle?

Last year we wondered along with Glenn Close whether or not Bridges was the killer in *Jagged Edge*, which compared favorably with Hitchcock's *Suspicion*. But Sidney Lumet, the director of *The Morning After*, has failed to plant any seeds of suspicion about Bridges' character. Bridges plays such a nice guy that the audience is bound to feel cheated if he turns out to be guilty, or left feeling flat and untested if he proves as innocent as he seems.



Jane Fonda in *The Morning After*.

Some mystery fans succeed more often than not in guessing the culprit. Others expect to be given a run for their money and then shown that in the end they missed the crucial clue. Here at Murder by Direction it's definitely a case of the latter. That's why we were disappointed to be right about Bridges in *The Morning After*. Even though there is an extra twist at the end, figuring this one out was just too easy. (We were disappointed in director Lumet a second time when he failed to notice that Viveca washes away her fingerprints well enough to frustrate the police, but actually has left a clear set of prints just before going out.)

If the audience is willing, as we were, to extend its suspension of disbelief on several matters, however, *The Morning After* delivers some good acting, a certain amount of wit, a blessedly low level of violence, and if not the genius of mystery then at least its aura. Jane Fonda is both tough and vulnerable as the bleached-blond Viveca who gradually works her way back toward her pre-theatrical identity as the down-to-earth brunette Alexandra Sternbergen. And Sidney Lumet covers over most of the plot shortcomings of *The Morning After* with his usual classy direction.

THE STORY THAT WON



The December Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Edith Miller of Seattle, Washington. Honorable mentions go to Caroline Bessey of Medford, Oregon; Catherine Balkin of Brooklyn, New York; Janet Streilein of Johnstown, Pennsylvania; David Martindale of Houston, Texas; Katherine Latham von Physter of San Diego, California; Waldron M. McLellon of Fern Park, Florida; Art Cosing of Arlington, Virginia; and Gail M. Upton of Rochester, Minnesota.

A MESSAGE FOR MOTHER G. by Edith Miller

After six months in Europe I spent my last traveler's checks on a return ticket. Waiting for my flight, I wandered around chilly, wet London.

As I stopped to read the notice for a concert I couldn't afford, a man dashed across the slippery pavement, skidded, and fell. Going to his aid, I found his head was deeply pierced by a nail protruding from an abandoned ladder.

With trembling hands he took out and gave me a package and some bills. "Keep money. . . . Packet Mother G.'s Bookshop. . . . Urgent. . . . Say Jack fell down and . . ." His eyes closed.

It's like an old movie, I thought, but the nursery quotation intrigued me. I got away—fast. Before reaching the bookshop I counted the money: six hundred pounds.

Explaining my errand, I gave the package to the shop's lone occupant, a plump middle-aged woman.

"Any message from him?" she asked.

"Only 'Jack fell down and . . .' I guess he meant 'broke his crown.'"

She gasped and turned pale.

Even Brailovsky's playing that afternoon couldn't help me forget the man (was he dead?), the package (what was in it?), or the money (were the bills stolen, and perhaps marked?). Reluctantly I dropped them into a church poorbox.

At the airport, a headline caught my eye. Bank robbery suspect Jack Winter had been found dead; his wife Jill, captured with the loot—all but six hundred pounds.

Mother G., I mused. *Mother Goose*. Three people stared as I finished Jack Winter's message: "And Jill came tumbling after."

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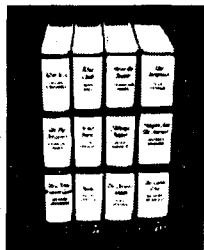
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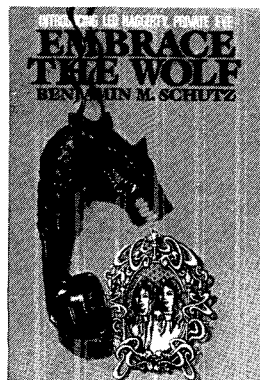
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